

Book of Shadows

Part 2

A TALE FROM THE CHRONICLES OF TIRALAINN



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The year 1733 of the Third Age

Iasal Gabhlan dreamed of a man trying to rape his daughter.

Isbaenna Gabhlan was only four years old, but in Iasal's dreamscape, she was a woman fully grown; there was no mistaking her tumble of auburn curls, just like her mother's, or her nearly crystalline blue eyes, mirror images of his own. She was somehow a woman, yet still no match for the man with whom she grappled, a man who had pinned her beneath him against the floor.

"No!" Iasal screamed as he watched the man rip at Isbaenna's clothes, wrenching her stomacher and corset away from her torso, exposing her breasts to his brutal, groping hands. Iasal struggled to reach Isbaenna, but he could not move. He felt rigid and leaden, his entire form filled with an unbearable cold, as if he had turned to stone and grown rooted to the spot in which he stood. He could not even summon his voice, but within his mind, he shrieked his outrage and fury, his terror and despair. "Isbaenna!" he cried. "*Mo'inion*, no! You bastard, no!" *My daughter!*

"All I have ever wanted is you," the man said to Isbaenna. He kissed her and Isbaenna struggled to turn her face away, her brows furrowed with horrified disgust.

"Stop...no...!" Isbaenna cried, wriggling furiously, futilely. "Get your hand off me!"

"Isbaenna!" Iasal shouted, struggling to will his arms into motion, to launch himself out of the shadows and toward her attacker. "You bastard! I will kill you for touching her! Do you hear me, you rot damn bastard? *I will kill you!*"

"You would make your bed with some common scrap of peasant trash," the man seethed at Isbaenna. His hand moved from her breast and groped against her skirts. He shoved them towards her hips, grasping at her crinolines, and she struggled against him.

"No...turn me loose, you bastard...!" she cried.

“You have always pretended that I am not fit to lick your boot heels, you pretentious bawd,” the man said, tearing at the fabric of her slippers. “I am of noble birth—I am a bloody damn Biocaire, and you would take that refuse between your thighs? You would let him sully you with his peasant seed?”

“Get off of me!” Isbaenna screamed, and she managed to force her knee between them, driving it into her assailant’s crotch. He wailed, his voice screeching and shrill, and crumpled away from her onto his side.

“Run, *inion!*” Iasal cried, even though she could not hear him. “Isbaenna, le do thoil, for the love of the Good Mother, run!” *Please!*

Isbaenna scrambled to her feet and ran. The man recovered from her blow too quickly, however, and caught her by the leg as she darted away. “You bloody...bitch...” he wheezed, jerking against her, sending her crashing to the floor again with a startled yelp.

“No!” Iasal cried. *Bloody damn it, why can I not move?* he thought, straining with all of his might. *What is this place? What in the duchan is going on?*

“Turn me loose!” Isbaenna screamed as the man crawled atop her again. Iasal watched in helpless horror as he shoved her skirts up toward her waist, revealing the pale lengths of her slender legs. “Get off of me!”

“Not until I have claimed what is mine,” the man grunted, reaching between them, shoving his breeches down. Iasal saw the pale swell of his exposed buttocks, and the rage and desperation within him became unbearable. “I have waited years for this—and I bloody damn mean to have it.”

“*No!*” Iasal screamed, and at last, whatever tethers had held him bound fast and helpless seemed to snap. He sprang from the corner of the room, launching himself at the man, hands outstretched to snap his neck upon its rotted axis.



Iasal sat up in bed with a start, his lucent blue eyes flown wide, his fists closed, his brows furrowed, his entire body tensed and poised to fight. It took him a long, bewildered moment to realize where he was—his own bed, in his own home and in the

dead of the night, to judge by the splay of moonlight spilling in from the windows and across the coverlets.

The breeze wafting in through the opened balcony doors was biting and cool; his skin was flushed and adrenaline-infused, glossed with a thin sheen of sweat. He looked all around him, his heart still hammering, his breath still hitching. His wife, Airrenigh, lay asleep beside him, curled on her side facing the empty place in the bed from which he'd stirred. Her copper-colored hair lay draped about her head in messy corona. The thin linen of her nightgown sleeve seemed aglow in the moon's soft glow.

He was graced with the Elfin gift of *the sight*, a telepathic ability that allowed him to speak to others with his mind, and to hear their thoughts in return. It also granted a modicum of foresight to some, a capacity to tell the future. His was a limited gift, but one he had mastered from a very young age. He opened his mind, searching for his daughter, and sensed Isbaenna somewhere close by, her mind subdued and peaceful with sleep.

A dream, Iasal thought, forking his fingers through his hair and pushing it back from his brow. *A dream and that is all.*

The words may have made sense to his mind, but the fear within his heart was still poignant and apparent. He climbed out of bed and left the bedroom. His bare feet stole soundlessly against the polished stone floors of the manor house. He was a full-blooded Gaeilge Elf. Because of his heritage, he moved lightly and lithely, more so than any human—like Airrenigh—could ever manage. His reflexes were quicker, his strength more formidable, his body's ability to heal itself so remarkable and astute, he never suffered illness, lived for centuries, compared to a human's mere decades, and only the most grievous of injuries could kill him. Despite this, as Iasal padded down the corridor toward his daughter's room, he trembled like a willow frond caught in a breeze, a terrible sense of dread still resonating from the dream, permeating through his form.

He opened Isbaenna's door slowly and peered beyond the threshold. Across the shadow-draped room, he saw her bed, the girl tucked beneath the blankets safe and sound, and still only a wisp of a child. He went to her bedside and sat next to her, gazing down at her headful of curls, her hand draped near her cheek against the pillow.

Isbaenna stirred slightly, squirming beneath her quilts, as his slight weight settled against her mattress. He saw her pale-colored eyes blink open sleepily. “Daddy...?” she asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

“*Ciunas,*” he told her with a smile, stroking his hand against her hair. *Hush.* He spoke to her in Gaeilgen, the native language of the Elves. “Go back to sleep, Isbaenna. I am sorry I woke you. All is well.”

She smiled and nodded, her eyelids already drooping closed again. “*Oiche maith,* Daddy,” she murmured. *Good night.*

“*Codladh samh duit, mo’inion,*” Iasal whispered, leaning over and pressing his lips lightly against her brow. *A pleasant sleep to you, my daughter.*

He closed her balcony doors before taking his leave. Spring was yet new in the midrealm of Tiralainn, and the ghost of winter lingered in the crisp air. He stood in Isbaenna’s doorway for a few more lingering moments, the fear in his heart faded now, but replaced with a heavy sorrow he had no accounting for, a melancholy so deep, it nearly stripped him of his breath as he gazed at his child. He did not understand its meaning, but all at once, it left him near to tears.

When he left Isbaenna, he returned to his bed. He stretched onto his side facing Airrenigh and reached for her, caressing her face with his fingertips and drawing a quiet murmur from her in her sleep. Despite touching her, their proximity, Iasal felt lonely and inexplicably dismayed, and he moved closer to her, wanting to feel her body against him, the warmth of her enveloping him, comforting him.

She murmured again as he kissed her, and she stirred as he rolled her onto her back, settling himself atop her. Her lips parted and he kissed her deeply, delving into her with his tongue and letting his fingers explore the contours of her breasts, the hardening outlines of her nipples palpable through her gown. His need for her was sudden and urgent; Iasal jerked at the hem of her nightgown, drawing it away from her hips, keeping his mouth pressed fiercely against hers.

He made love to her for hours, over and over driving her to shuddering release, until both of them were trembling and exhausted, doused in sweat and gasping for breath. He took her, using his hands and mouth and hips to taste, explore and devour her,

exercising a relentless but tender passion he had not demonstrated since before Isbaenna's birth.

"What was that?" Airrenigh whispered, smiling up at him, her dark eyes flashing in the moonlight. Even in the dim glow, he could see her face was flushed; he could feel the muscles within her stomach, deep within her core fluttering against him in the last, fading spasms of ecstasy.

"What?" he asked, as she touched his face, cradling his cheeks between her palms. She wiped a gloss of sweat from his brow and leaned up from her pillows to kiss him.

"You have not made love to me like that in ages," she said.

He laughed softly. "Like what?" he asked her, but he knew. In his heart, where that terrible, heavy, lonely coldness still remained, he knew. *Like it is the last time I ever will.*

She seemed to be studying him; he could tell by her expression, the lift to her brows, and the curious hook to her smile, that she was troubled. "I had begun to think you had grown tired of me," she said. "It has been so long since you last..." Her voice faded momentarily.

"I make love to you every night," he said.

"Not like that," she replied. "Not like you used to. I have worried age has touched my face and body too unkindly, that you...you might not want me anymore."

He kissed her. "You are a child compared to me, Airrenigh," he whispered. "I have lived thrice again your years."

"And yet you look half of mine," she said, caressing his face, tracing the outline of his lips with her thumb.

This troubled her deeply, and he knew it; he did not need his sight to sense it about her. She had been a young woman, only twenty years old, upon their introduction, a ravishing beauty filled with eager passion. Twenty-one years had passed since then, however, and Airrenigh had grown self-conscious of her appearance, anxious that Iasal would find her unseemly, particularly since her body had changed, softening and thickening in the years since Isbaenna's birth. He had tried to reassure her, to never give her cause to doubt his love, but her insecurities remained. He could not help the benefit of

his Elfin birth, or the fact that he simply did not age in outward appearance as humans did.

“Hear me, Airrenigh,” he breathed, kissing her again, touching his lips to hers over and over. “You are as beautiful to me as the first time I saw you. You will never be less than this to me. You will always take my breath.” He held her face between his hands and kissed her deeply. “I will always want you.”

The worry in her face did not lessen, and he leaned toward her, kissing her, drawing her bottom lip between his teeth momentarily, nipping her lightly. “In fact,” he murmured. “I want you right now.”

It worked. Airrenigh giggled, her fingers twining in his hair, drawing him near. “Do you, *mo’leannan?*” she asked, calling him *my lover* in Gaeilgen.

“*Muise,*” he replied, making her laugh out loud as he nuzzled her neck. *Indeed.* He forced the dream from his mind, and all of the sorrow it had brought upon him. He had more important things on his mind at the moment. *Namely the ravishing of my wife.*



Iasal rose with the dawn the next morning, as was his habit. He left Airrenigh asleep in the bed, dressed, and stole out of the manor house into the cool, damp gardens.

He walked awhile before settling on a favorite spot before a large reflective pool. There was no breeze to generate a current, and the plane of water was as flat and smooth as a mirror. He folded his long legs beneath him, settling against the grass, not minding the dew seeping through his breeches.

He closed his eyes and drew in a long, deep, slow breath through his nose. He pursed his lips slightly and released the breath in the same deliberate fashion. *Suaimhneas laistigh de me...ciunas ar fud me*, he thought, words to a simple mantra he had practiced for more than one hundred and fifty years. *Peace within me, silence throughout me.*

Suaimhneas laistigh de me...ciunas ar fud me.

The rhythmic Gaelic words calmed his mind almost instantly, wiping away any lingering anxieties left in the aftermath of his nightmare. He repeated them to himself over and over again, until they lost all meaning within his mind and merely became a pattern of sounds, something to hone his energy toward, focus his concentration solely, unwaveringly upon.

Suaimhneas laistigh de me...ciunas ar fud me.

He meditated for the better part of an hour, a practice among the Buion Elfin warrior sect known as *meoraich*. It was an archaic custom, one that Iasal dutifully observed, even though he had relinquished any right or reason to five years earlier, at the end of the Shadow War.

During that conflict, Iasal had been among a small group of men and Elves who had accompanied the prince of Tiralainn, a boy named Trejaeran Muirel north to rescue his father. Petrich Muirel had been taken captive by the realm's king at the time, Trejaeran's uncle, Lahnduren, who had stolen the crown from Trejaeran and his twin

sister, Qynh, after murdering their parents. Iasal and Airrenigh had both been members of the Comhar, an alliance of men and Elves dedicated to reclaiming the throne for the rightful twin heirs. Lahnduren had ruled Tiralainn with a brutal and evil hand, aided by the dark magic of his witch-queen, Ciardha. Both had been vanquished at the end of the war; Trejaeran's father had been rescued, and Qynh had claimed the throne. Lahnduren and Ciardha had been killed, and the world had built itself anew from the dark ashes of the old.

Iasal, too, had built himself anew. At the time of the war, he had lived among the Donnag'crann Elves in the southrealm of Tiralainn, the last community of Gaelge to practice the ancient ways of their arboreal ancestors. He had grown up among the treetops of a primordial forest, with the crowns of oaks for his ceilings, maple boughs for his rafters, pine needles for his carpets. He had been a *ceannaire* among an exclusive sect of Elfin warriors known as the *Buion*, one of their most celebrated and highly ranked leaders. Back then, Iasal would have considered it an abomination to leave the Donnag'crann and their ways behind him—to abandon the Buion warriors, but that was before the Shadow War.

Before I met Airrenigh.

Now he lived in Airrenigh's house, a sprawling estate called Orinein, and shared in her title as the Baronmaster of Ciarrai County. He had left the Buion and the Donnag'crann to make a life for himself among menfolk with Airrenigh. Together, they oversaw tax collecting and county law enforcement, all in the name of the Crown. He and Airrenigh managed day-to-day affairs of state, entertained neighboring nobles and served their king and queen.

A king I love as a son.

Kierken, Qynh's husband, the King of Tiralainn, had been Iasal's *mac'leinn*, or student, among the Buion at the time of the war. As Kierken had once served Iasal loyally, faithfully, Iasal now in turn did the same for his young liege.

He thought of Airrenigh, the woman he still loved so deeply, he could feel the wrench of emotions in his heart just to see her smile, and of Isbaenna, the sweet and priceless fruit of their love, both the most precious possessions his heart had ever—or would ever—know. Once upon a time, his training, his adherence to the strict and

specific ways of the Buion had meant everything to him, and even though he continued to practice some of their methods, as with his daily *meoraich*, he now realized how foolish he had been, how many decades wasted with such fruitless and meaningless pursuits.

“Daddy?”

Iasal opened his eyes at the sound of his daughter’s voice. There was Elf enough within her by the benefit of birth that her footsteps had fallen as softly in the grass as his might have upon approach, and his mind had been too distracted with distant thoughts and his meditation to sense her.

He smiled to see Isbaenna duck among nearby hedges and scamper toward him, her arms outstretched, her mouth unfurling in a broad, happy smile. “Daddy!” she exclaimed. “Here you are!”

She crushed herself against him, scarcely giving him time enough to pivot his hips and face her. Her little arms clamped about his throat, momentarily choking him, and he laughed as her warm lips pressed firmly against his cheek. “You are cold,” she said.

“Winter has not yet left us. It is cold out,” he replied, gathering her in his arms and bearing her slight weight easily as he rose to his feet. She kept her arms around his neck and locked her legs around his waist, tucking her face against his shoulder.

“Are you finished with your *meoraich*?” Isbaenna asked.

He laughed again, tilting his face down toward hers and brushing the tip of his nose lightly against his daughter’s to make her giggle. “I am now, *inion*,” he said. “Come. Let us see what is for breakfast.”

He carried her back toward the house, following the manicured paths through the garden terraces. “Did you sleep well, Isbaenna?” he asked her, and she nodded.

“Did you?” she asked.

Elves could not lie. Just as accelerated healing capacities, long lives and preternatural coordination were within their very natures, so, too, was an intrinsic honesty. Iasal could open his mouth a thousand-fold to offer lies, but his voice would not come; his nature would render him mute.

He could not lie, but he could tell limited truths, as suited his needs. In this case, he smiled at Isbaenna and said, “I slept as the Good Mother likely intended, *inion*.”

I will not live to see her grow to womanhood.

The thought came upon him out of nowhere, abrupt and stark and cold. It was not an anxious fear within his mind, an insecurity finding inner voice. His gift of the sight was modest at best, but it had allowed him glimpses into the future before, premonitions of things yet to come, and that is what these words felt like to him, nearly a memory; something that felt like fact set in stone and meant to occur, an infallible and incontrovertible truth.

Iasal stumbled, his breath drawing still, his eyes widening somewhat.

I will not live to see the end of this year.

“Daddy?” Isbaenna said, leaning back from his shoulder, noticing his distraction, his sudden dismay. “Daddy, what is wrong?” Her pretty little face grew worried, frightened by his fright, and he struggled to soften his expression, to assuage her fears, if not his own.

“Nothing,” he said, because it was not a lie. The words had come to him from out of the blue, and had not repeated themselves. They were gone from his mind, leaving only a lingering, icy chill in their wake, something that well could have been no more than some restless hold-over from his dream the night before. “It...it is nothing, Isbaenna.”

He bounced her in his arms, tucking his face against the nook of her jaw and kissing her loudly, sloppily to distract her. She squirmed in his grasp, her peals of laughter shrill and delighted against his ear. “Stop it! Stop, Daddy, please!”

“As you wish,” he said, still smiling. He carried her again toward Orinein, resuming his mantra once more in his mind lest those dark thoughts and ominous words creep back upon him again.

Suaimhneas laistigh de me...ciunas ar fud me.

Peace within me...silence throughout me.



“Daddy, tell me about fighting the giant,” Isbaenna said as they trekked up the sloping garden hillside toward the manor house.

“Again?” he asked. “Surely you are tired of that by now, *inion*.”

“No, I’m not,” she insisted, shaking her head against his shoulder. “Truly, Daddy, I promise.”

Iasal chuckled. “*Maith thu,*” he said. *Very well.* “It was at the end of the Shadow War, the last days, although we did not realize it at the time. We had stolen upon the fortress of Dorchadas and—”

“In the Barren Mountain foothills,” Isbaenna interjected.

“Yes,” Iasal agreed. “And we—”

“On the shores of Linn Dorcha,” Isbaenna supplied.

“Yes, *muise,*” Iasal said. *Indeed.*

“It was you, and Eoghan and Wyndetta Graegan,” Isbaenna said. “Trejaeran had been carried away by the giant crow when the rope bridge broke over the Braon i’Tir gorge in the Dithreabh, just before reaching the Northern Expanse. Maime had fallen and you thought she was dead, even though she was not. The Golden Queen, Orlaith, had sent owls into the ravine to catch Maime and save her. Rhyden and Fiontan, too, even though the wolf pack had—”

“I have an idea, *inion,*” Iasal said with a laugh. “Why do you not tell *me* about fighting the giant?”

Isbaenna grinned broadly, clearly delighted by this notion. “It was you and Eoghan and Wyndetta Graegan upon the terraces of Dorchadas,” she said. “There were no guards posted, and you suspected it was a trap. There was nothing for it, though—no turning back. You knew Trejaeran was there, inside the tower, and you had all pledged to rescue him.”

“And then what happened?”

“Out of nowhere, Lahnduren’s Damantas army appeared,” Isbaenna said, her eyes growing round, her voice becoming soft. “A thousand armed soldiers surrounding you from all sides, and none of you with armor, and just barely swords and quivers. You had your *cread-mor*, your great-grandfather’s blade, and—”

“*Cleadh mor,*” Iasal corrected gently, pronouncing the term *cleathe-moor*. The sword had been in the Gabhlan family for many generations beyond his great-grandfather, but such things were of inconsequence to one as young as Isbaenna, and he did not mention it.

“Then, at the lead of the Damantas army, a giant steps out,” Isbaenna said, breathless, her eyes distant, as if she visualized the scene in vivid detail in her mind. “As tall as...as a mountainside himself, nearly half-again the height of the Dorchadas tower...”

“Not nearly that tall, *inion*,” Iasal said. “You give him too much credit, child, or me for beating him—one of us.”

“I am not to that part yet, Daddy,” she said, her brows narrowing in disapproval. “*Ciunas*.” *Hush*.

He laughed, pinching his fingertips to his thumb with one hand and supporting her weight with the other while he tapped his forehead and chin in apology. “*Gabh mo leithsceal*,” he said. *I beg your pardon*.

“The giant stepped forward and challenged you to fight him,” Isbaenna continued, her gaze resuming that wonder-struck, distant cast. “The army surged forward, separating you from Eoghan and Wyndetta. They all began to fight, but not with you—the giant wanted you for himself. Because you are a Buion, the greatest of all warriors, menfolk or Elves. You are nigh unstoppable.”

Tell that to my spine, Iasal thought, noticing that Isbaenna was no longer so wee a scrap of girl as she once had been, and that carrying her the length of the gardens—and uphill at that—was no longer so easy a task as it had once proven.

“Here, *inion*,” he grunted, pausing long enough to stoop forward, setting her onto her feet. “Walk with me while you tell me the rest.”

Isbaenna slipped her hand against his and skipped along to match his long-legged stride. She chattered on, barely missing a beat for the minor interruption. “The giant had a broadsword the length of a grown man,” she said. “He swung it at you time and again, but it was no match for your...*cleadh mor*...” She glanced up at Iasal and he smiled, nodding to let her know she had pronounced it well that time.

“He boxed you around some, too,” she said. “Broke your nose and snapped your ribs.”

“Knocked out my teeth, too,” Iasal said, clucking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. By doing this, he loosened the thin frame of a dental bridge he wore, and he spat out the narrow crescent of wire affixed with three false teeth, all fashioned from

porcelain, against his palm. He held it out to Isbaenna and made a show of grinning at her, showing off the gaps left without the bridge in place. Isbaenna giggled, even though she was trying to frown at him.

“I was going to say that,” she said. “Put them back in, Daddy. You look silly.”

Iasal slipped the bridge back into his mouth and they walked again. “So I have been boxed about and battered some,” he observed. “Against a giant the size of a mountain with a broadsword the length of a man. Tell me, *inion*, how did I manage to survive such a fight?”

“Because you are a Buion,” she said, so matter-of-factly and with such obvious wonder and pride, he did not have the heart to remind her that he was one no longer. “You cut off the giant’s arms one at a time, and then, when he crashed to the ground and flailed at you with naught save bloody stumps, you took his broadsword in one hand, your *cleadh mor* in the other and you chopped his head off clean from his neck...” She mimed with her hands, holding an imaginary sword clenched in each fist. “The *Fior’Cosan* says a Buion cannot strike against an unarmed opponent, but the giant fought you, even without his sword or hands, so you could still beat him.”

Iasal arched his brow. “How do you know so much about the *Fior’Cosan*?” he asked. The *Fior’Cosan*, or *true path* was the code of honor among the Buion warriors, a strict regiment of guidelines and rules of engagement by which the Buion trained, fought and lived. The ritual practice of the *meoraich* was just one of many dictated by the *Fior’Cosan*; that a Buion may not strike down an unarmed opponent without losing honor was yet another.

“You told me, Daddy,” Isbaenna said. She turned her eyes up to Iasal’s, smiling with delight. “One day I am going to be a Buion warrior just like you, and fight giants, too.”

“You might be hard-pressed for that, *inion*,” Iasal told her fondly, tousling her hair. “As that one was the last, or so I have been told.”

He glanced up, hearing the unexpected approach of hurried footsteps in the grass. He saw Cuthbert, one of his stewards, hurrying along the path toward them. “My lord!” Cuthbert called out, catching sight of Iasal and quickening his pace. “Lord Gabhlan!”

“What is it?” Iasal asked, puzzled and somewhat alarmed by the anxious expression on the man’s face. Isbaenna saw it, too, and shied behind Iasal’s leg, clutching at his pant leg uncertainly.

“My Lord Gabhlan,” Cuthbert said, reaching them and affecting a quick bow. “Forgive my intrusion, my lord, but Lear Haldon pays call.”

Lear Haldon was the captain of the Ciarrai County guards, a soldier who had been in Airrenigh’s service since well before the war. Iasal was not the original baronmaster of the county. That distinction had belonged to Airrenigh’s first husband through an arranged marriage, a man named Aossach an’Clare. Aossach had been killed in the same violent overthrow at the royal palace in Belgaeran that had seen Lahnduren and his witch-queen in power, the events of the Shadow War set into motion. Lear Haldon had been appointed by Aossach shortly before his death; in the more than twenty years since, he had served Airrenigh devotedly, a loyalty he had graciously extended to Iasal as well, if only by the benefit of being Airrenigh’s husband.

Lear frequently visited Orinein to impart news from throughout the county, or to discuss business or other political affairs, but never unannounced, and never so early in the morrow.

“He said it was urgent, my lord,” Cuthbert added. “Lady Airrenigh is already with him in the library, but she sent me to find you.”

Iasal nodded. “Of course,” he said. He glanced down at Isbaenna, and draped his hand briefly, fondly against the crown of her head. “Will you see to it that Isbaenna is given her breakfast, le do thoil?” he asked. *Please*. “Mine will have to be delayed, I am afraid.”



“I am so sorry to be the one to tell you of such things, my lady,” Iasal overheard Lear Haldon say to Airrenigh as he walked into the library on the main floor at Orinein. They stood together in front of the fireplace. A fresh blaze had been tended beyond the hearth, bright flames licking against planks of wood, and Lear held both of Airrenigh’s hands with his own.

“What things?” Iasal asked. “What tidings, Lear?”

Airrenigh turned to him, drawing her hands away from Lear. Her pallor was ashen, her eyes large and sorrowful. “Oh, *mo’leannan*,” she said. “Fiontan Methven is dead. His father, Ioruan, too.”

Iasal gasped sharply, stunned. Fiontan was the Baronmaster of Corgue County, their neighboring province. He had inherited the title from his father two years ago. Both Fiontan and Ioruan had been two of their staunchest allies during the Shadow War, and Fiontan had traveled in the same party as Iasal to rescue Trejaeran’s father from the north. It had been at least a year since Iasal had seen Fiontan, but he had long-since come to consider the younger Elf a friend.

“Mathair Maith,” Iasal whispered. “What... what happened?”

“He was murdered, my lord,” Lear said. “They both were, their heads severed by a pair of mercenaries traveling to the Dithreabh from the westrealm. We caught them here, in Ciarrai County. They had the missing heads with them, wrapped in sacks, fettered to their saddles. We think they were coming for you next.”

“Us?” Airrenigh gasped, her face draining to ashen.

“What do you mean?” Iasal asked, his brows narrowing, his hands closing slowly, reflexively into fists.

Lear reached beneath the lapel of his heavy overcoat for an inner pocket. “I was just about to explain to my lady...” he said, pulling out a folded scrap of parchment, which he offered to Iasal. “We found this on one of them.”

Iasal unfolded the page. “What is it?” Airrenigh asked, and he glanced at her, stricken.

“It is a placard,” he said. “Calling for our heads, Airrenigh. Someone has offered a bounty for every member of the original Comhar.”



“What do you mean?” Airrenigh snatched the parchment away from Iasal. It was hand-written, little more than scrawled notes set hastily to the page, and she frowned. “Who issued this?” she demanded. “It offers one-hundred thousand marks apiece—a king’s ransom, verily—for each of our heads. *Each* of us, all of the Comhar members. Who would do such a thing? And who would have the coffers to afford it?”

“I can think of someone,” Iasal said, drawing her gaze. “Someone with more reason than any to hate the lot of us. You and me, especially, Airrenigh.”

She blinked, her expression softening with pained realization.

“Tressach an’ Clare,” Iasal said, and Lear flinched as if he had been physically struck.

“Lord an’ Clare?” Lear said quietly. “My...my Lord Aossach’s son?”

“My stepson,” Airrenigh said, stricken.

“Tressach has the money to post such a bounty,” Iasal said. “It was part and parcel of his inheritance from Aossach.”

Lear shook his head in disbelief. “Begging your pardon, Lord Gabhlan, but I...I cannot fathom of that. Lord an’ Clare is a good man and a hero besides. He was the Commander of the Comhar army. He led the westward assault in the siege of Belgaeran at the end of the Shadow War, my lord. He helped to win the war and claim the throne for Kierken.”

“*Muise*,” Iasal said dryly. *Indeed*. “After he tried to murder Kierken in the tunnels of the Fiainas beneath the Midland Mountains and steal his place in Qynh’s heart—not to mention at her side on the throne.”

“Iasal, I...I cannot believe such a thing, either,” Airrenigh said, to Iasal’s surprise. “There was never proof that Tressach tried to murder Kierken—even Kierken himself

would not say as much. I know he has not lived a guileless existence, but this...?" She flapped the parchment demonstratively.

"There was enough proof of his guilt for your cousin, Dagarron, to plow out Tressach's front teeth with his fists," Iasal said.

Airrenigh's brows narrowed again. "I think you and Dagarron both love Kierken as might a pair of fathers, and you both choose to judge Tressach by that rather than the truth of the circumstances."

"How can you defend him?" Iasal exclaimed, his eyes wide. "This is the same man who time and again in the years following his father's death tried to discredit and disgrace you, to force you from Orinein, to relinquish your title!"

"I have never blamed Tressach for his anger toward me," Airrenigh said coolly. "In his eyes, it was righteous. I was a child-bride, a girl his age forced to be his stepmother, and then, within months of this new acquaintance, Aossach died and left to me everything Tressach felt was his rightly due. He hates me, true, but that does not mean he would try to hurt Kierken—or something like this. That does not make him a murderer."

Iasal locked gazes with her, and she held his glare evenly. In the five years since the war, they had avoided any in-depth discussion of Tressach an'Clare—for specifically this reason.

"We will see, then, if he is a murderer or not," Iasal told her, and he strode across the room to the bell pull. When Cuthbert appeared in the library doorway, responding to the beckon, Iasal turned to him. "Send word to the stables and have them saddle my horse," he said. "See that Captain Haldon's horse is refreshed, as well, and made ready."

"Yes, my lord," Cuthbert said with a nod, ducking from the room.

"I want you to send word to the others while I am gone," Iasal said to Airrenigh. "All of the Comhar members—tell them what has happened, and to beware."

"Where are you going?" Airrenigh asked.

"You said the mercenaries are here, caught in Ciarrai County?" Iasal asked Lear, who nodded.

"Yes, my lord," he said. "They are being held in the village jail at Hyndland."

“Good,” Iasal said. “Order the gates to Orinein closed and barred, and stand thrice the customary sentries at all posts on these grounds. You and I are riding for Hyndland.”



“Daddy?”

Iasal looked up as he sat against the side of his bed, shoving his feet down into his well-worn boots. Isbaenna stood in the doorway watching him, her large eyes round and uncertain.

He smiled for her; she was just a child, and would not understand matters any more clearly if he was to explain them to her, and so, for the best, he acted as though naught in the Bith was amiss.

“Yes, *mo 'chroi?*” he asked, calling her *my heart*.

“May I go outside and play in the garden?” she asked. “Maime told me to ask you.”

Ah, he thought. Here was Airrenigh’s little rebuttal for his decision to ride to Hyndland and for thinking Tressach an’Clare to be the heart of the mercenary trouble. *She will make me the bad one in Isbaenna’s regard. Go raimh maith agat, mo’bean.* Thank you very much, my wife.

“No, Isbaenna,” he said. “Not today.”

“Why not?” she asked. “It is not raining. And it is not too cold now.”

He felt badly. The midrealm of Tiralainn had endured a dreary soggy fall last year, which had yielded to a bitter winter and now a sodden, chilly spring. He could count on one hand the number of days in the past month where there had not been rain at least part of the day and Isbaenna had been able to escape the confines of Orinein to play outside.

“I am sorry,” he said to her. “Truly I am, Isbaenna. But not today.”

He did not think it was safe for her to be outside the manor house, even with the added security measures he had ordered. With the sort of money being offered in reward for his death and Airrenigh’s, he refused to take that kind of risk.

Isbaenna watched him rise to his feet. Her eyes cut along the length of his form, taking into account that he wore his traveling coat, a long, heavy, double-breasted jacket with broad tail flaps that fell to his ankles. He had strapped his scabbard to his belt beneath his doublet, and she did not miss the wink of sunlight through the window off the polished silver hilt of his cleadh mor, fashioned from tang to pommel in the image of a swift—or *gabhlán*, his family's symbol—in mid-flight.

“Where are you going?” Isbaenna asked.

“For a ride with Captain Haldon,” Iasal replied, because although it was not the whole truth, it was enough to placate his daughter. He left the room, pausing long enough to lean down and kiss her cheek, wanting to get away quickly before she pinned him down with questions he could not so easily elude. “I will not be long, *iníon*. You mind your Maime while I am out.”



“Forgive me for expressing my doubt earlier, Lord Gabhlan,” Lear Haldon said as he and Iasal rode together, their horses plodding abreast along one of the winding, rutted, muddy county highways north. Lear brushed his fingertips against his forehead and chin in apology to Iasal. “It was out of turn and I meant no discourtesy to you.”

“I know, *mo ’cara*,” Iasal said, calling the captain *my friend*. “I drew no offense.”

“It is just...” Lear gave Iasal a cautious sideways glance and then cut his eyes back toward the road. “I have known Tressach an’ Clare many long years, my lord. Since his boyhood, practically. I served under his command during the Shadow War, was with him in the charge against Belgaeran, my lord. There have been more times in my life than not when I would have gladly fought and died by Tressach an’ Clare’s word alone—for Tressach an’ Clare, my lord.”

“I know,” Iasal said again. He offered no more than this and they continued onward in silence. He knew that Lear felt uncomfortable now; he could sense the man’s anxiety. “You have served the an’ Clare family for a long time, have you not, Lear?”

“Yes, my lord,” the man replied. “Twenty-three years. I was hired just before my Lord Aossach married Lady Airrenigh.”

“She has told me what a help you were to her after Aossach’s death,” Iasal said. “You were a bastion to her—that is what she called you.”

A thousand times I might have lost my grip on that manor house, and the entire county besides had it not been for Lear, she had told him. He was a level head when I was too clouded with grief to think clearly, a voice of reason when despair nearly stripped me of my own.

Airrenigh’s own father had died estranged from her, an emotional chasm that haunted the woman even now. In many ways, she had told Iasal, Aossach an’ Clare had filled that void within her heart and life—the need for a father-figure—and when Aossach had died, Lear, in turn, had taken over in his stead.

Lear smiled, the corner of his mouth lifting crookedly. “She is a fine woman, Lady Airrenigh,” he said, and he glanced at Iasal, nodding once in deference. “And you are lucky to have her.”

“*Muise*,” Iasal agreed. *Indeed*.

Lear reined his horse to a stop, and Iasal did the same. “Forgive me, my lord, but I must walk into the woods a moment,” Lear said, swinging his leg around and dismounting. “Something with breakfast has disagreed with me this morrow.” He cracked a grin and walked into the thick trees, ducking around thickets and thorny brambles, his boot soles snapping and cracking in fallen sticks and last-autumn’s fallen leaves.

“Take your time.” Iasal swung himself gracefully down from his saddle as well, stretching his legs. He stepped off the shoulder of the road and walked among the trees, tilting his face up toward the crowns, smiling to see the thickening growth of new leaves above him. He opened his mind, extending his sight, and felt the sensation of the trees, their alien but peaceful, gentle sentience within him.

During the long years of the Shadow War, when Lahnduren and Ciardha had reigned over Tiralainn, Iasal had not been able to reach out to the trees with his sight. Ciardha’s dark magic had cursed the water in the land, and through it, she had poisoned all of the trees to her dark sway. Opening his mind to them then would have been akin to opening his mind to Ciardha himself, and for too long, Iasal had missed and longed for an opportunity just such as this.

“You have always been very kind to accept me as you have,” he called to Lear, his eyes still closed, his mind filled with the wondrous, whispering sensation of the trees. “You and all of the county soldiers have.”

The Comhar may have been an alliance of men and Elves, and soldiers like Lear might have fought under their banners to restore the throne to its rightful Elfin heirs, but that did not mean that all menfolk liked Elves, or considered them to be fast fellows. Iasal’s most beloved friend, in fact, had once been his most bitter rival—Eoghan Drouin, a man who had once fought for the Comhar, but had disliked Elves just the same.

“It is not kindness, my lord,” Lear called from behind him, from his discreet spot behind a large pine tree. “You are the Baronmaster. My loyalty—and that of my men—comes without question or qualm.”

“Even for an Elf?” Iasal asked, because he knew there were men among the county ranks who disapproved of his appointment, his marriage to Airrenigh. Tressach an’Clare had been chief among them, and he had never made any secret of his ill will toward Iasal.

“Yes, my lord,” Lear called back, his voice tinged with good humor, as though he spoke with a smile. “Even for an Elf.”

Iasal opened his eyes and watched a cluster of birds suddenly dance across his line of sight overhead, fluttering away, disturbed from hidden roosts. He could feel them through his sight if he focused on them hard enough; fleeting moments of darting, primitive thoughts—startlement and fright, a thrilling instinct to flee.

“I know you feel that way for Tressach an’Clare, as well,” he said to Lear. “And I hope you are right, *mo’cara*, your confidence not misplaced. Yours, or Airrenigh’s.”

“Oh, I do not think it will be,” Lear said, and this time when he spoke, his voice came from almost directly behind Iasal, overlapping with a soft, sudden hiss—the scrape of a metal blade against a leather scabbard, a sword being unsheathed.

Iasal whirled, snapping his mind shut, severing all of the sensory distractions that had prevented him from realizing Lear’s approach. His hand darted instinctively for his cleadh mor, his fingers curling against the hilt, but the flash of sunlight through the trees against the exposed length of a blade, the cold press of its edge as Lear leveled it against his throat, drew him abruptly, breathlessly still.

“You see, Lord Gabhlan,” Lear said, his eyebrow arched, his mouth hooked in a wry and decidedly mirthless smile. “Tressach an’Clare had guaranteed it will be worth my while to deliver your head to him personally...and I have every confidence that he will make it so.”



“You would do this, Lear?” Iasal asked, locking gazes with the captain of his guard. “To me? To Airrenigh?”

“Only to you,” Lear replied, keeping his sword against the angle of Iasal’s jaw. “I have struck a barter with my Lord an’ Clare, and he has promised me no harm will come to Airrenigh if I bring your head to him.”

Iasal did not move. He kept his hand against his sword hilt, his fingers curled against the cool metal, but made no effort to draw the blade. He kept his eyes on Lear and forced his heart, which now raced at a frantic measure, to settle. If he yielded to the same instinctive raw emotion that had caused the birds to fly away overhead only moments ago, it could well see him dead. He drew in a long, deep breath through his nose and pushed it out slowly through his mouth, trying to calm himself.

Suaimhneas laistigh de me, he thought, a quiet, soothing voice whispering within his mind. *Ciunas ar fud me. Peace within me...silence throughout me.*

“You would side with a traitor, then?” he asked Lear. “Twenty-three years of noble service, and you would piss it away for Tressach an’ Clare?”

“No, I would piss it away for Airrenigh,” Lear snapped back, his brows furrowing. He shoved the edge of his sword more roughly against Iasal’s neck, and Iasal drew in a hissing breath through his teeth as the sharpened steel drew blood.

“Those years of service have been to *her*, you rotted bastard Elf, not to you or your bloody rot Elf king,” Lear seethed, leaning toward Iasal, his face flushed, his eyes flashing with fury. While Iasal reined his emotions fully, coolly into check, Lear apparently let his blaze, searing through him. “I made a deal with Tressach upon his father’s death—let me take Aossach’s place in Airrenigh’s heart, and I would convince her to return the barony to him. I have struck that same sort of bargain again, only it is your head he wants this time, not your title. I have only ever wanted Airrenigh. Her youth and beauty were wasted upon Aossach—and they are wasted with you, as well.”

He reached out with his free hand, clamping his fingers fiercely against Iasal's chin. "Look at you," he hissed. "Time marches forward, bearing its unsightly toll on the lot of us, save for you of the fair Elfin folk. A few more years, and her marriage to you will become as a joke—you will look more the part of her son than her husband. And all this while, to know you have plowed between her thighs all of these long, rotted years...Mother Above, how I hate you, Iasal Gabhlan. You will take what you want from Airrenigh until she is long-since spent, and then you will cast her aside for some younger, fairer trophy. You will leave her broken and hollow, a husk of the woman she was when Aossach first brought her to Orinein, the woman I first fell in love with."

Iasal did not avert his gaze from Lear. "No," he said. "I will not."

"You are right on that account," Lear said. "Because I will not let you."

"You will break her heart if you do this, Lear," Iasal said, and slowly, he adjusted his grip on his sword hilt, settling it at the ready in his palm.

"She will never know it was my hand that cut you down," Lear replied. "She has seen the placard. She knows of the bounty. I will tell her we were stopped along the way to Hyndland, that mercenaries attacked us from all sides. You fought bravely and well, but were outnumbered three to one. Perhaps during the Shadow War, such odds would have proven of no consequence to a Buion, but you are five years out of practice; five years grown soft and slow."

He leaned closer to Iasal, nearly whispering now. "Oh, her heart will be broken indeed," he said. "But she will find comfort with me, as she always has—with her bastion. The one who has been by her side at every turn. Her grief will bind her to me, and her fright will hold her fast, because once the mercenaries are finished with you, I mean to see that they will carve open your rot damn whelp, as well."

Whatever stoic resolve Iasal had mastered abruptly dissolved. His heart suddenly thundered in his ears. His throat constricted; his breath stopped cold and he felt his mouth grow tacky and dry. "Isbaenna..." he whispered.

"Her rotted visage would be nothing but a persistent reminder of you," Lear said. "And I have shared Airrenigh's heart for far too long. I will not—"

Iasal whipped his sword from his scabbard, dancing back and swinging the gleaming cleadh mor in a sharp, swift arc. He battered Lear's sword away from his face,

sending the man stumbling sideways, and then he attacked, his face twisted with rage. “You will not touch my child!” he roared, his voice hoarse and choked with fury.

He drove Lear back with a stunning and relentless volley of sword strikes. Lear staggered and floundered, struggling to keep his blade between himself and the deadly edge of the cleadh mor. It had been five years, true, since Iasal had last tasted of battle, much less done more than parry or play with his cleadh mor in hand, but he had spent thrice the captain’s lifetime before that training in the harsh methods of the Buion, mastering the skills of warfare.

Lear’s boot heel settled against the exposed knob of a tree root and he yelped, stumbling, falling to his knees. Iasal snapped the tip of his cleadh mor beneath Lear’s wrist, drawing blood, and then with another deft swing, Lear’s sword went flying from his hand, sailing across the narrow breadth of the clearing and landing in a blanket of leaves.

“If any harm comes upon my child, you mark this well—I will spent the rest of my days hunting down those responsible and peeling the sinew back from their bones,” Iasal seethed, winded, his body still trembling with an infusion of adrenaline and rage. “By my breath, my honor and my life, I will.”

“Please...!” Lear gasped, cringing, drawing his hands up as Iasal leveled his blade to open his throat. “Do not...!”

According to the *Fior’Cosan*, the code of ethics by which Iasal had spent a lifetime bound as a Buion warrior, he could not kill Lear, no matter his anger, no matter his desire. Lear was disarmed, and more than this, he had just supplicated himself, pleading for Iasal’s mercy. Although Iasal had left the Buion, he remained committed to the principles and practices of the *Fior’Cosan*, and he hesitated, his sword wavering.

Suaimhneas laistigh de me...ciunas ar fud me, he thought, struggling to regain control of his runaway emotions. *Peace within me...silence throughout me.*

A Buion was supposed to exercise discipline, composure; those were the lessons techniques such as his daily *meoraich* were supposed to impart. A Buion was more than a highly trained warrior; they were taught nearly from birth to be temperate in manner, governed by reason and skill—by the *Fior’Cosan*—rather than emotion or impulse.

Suaimhneas laistigh de me...ciunas ar fud me. Peace within me...silence throughout me.

“Tell me your heart has changed,” Iasal said to Lear. “Tell me your loyalties lie now with me, that my wife means nothing to you and my child will know no threat from your blade. Tell me, and I might spare you.”

He thought of this man driving his sword into Isbaenna’s soft belly, the blade that now lay across the clearing. He thought of his daughter’s face, the pained surprise in her lucent blue eyes as the sword found its mark, and her soft, choked cry as Lear split her open, running her through.

Suaimhneas laistigh de me...ciunas ar fud me. Peace within me...silence throughout me.

“Tell me, Lear,” he said again, his voice cracked and trembling. “Tell me these moments only just passed have made you see the erring of your judgment, the misplacement of your confidences—that the entire measure of your heart forged these past twenty-three years has changed in full.”

He grabbed a handful of Lear’s head and wrenched the man’s head back, causing him to gasp in frightened pain. “Then tell me where Tressach an’Clare is, you rot damn bastard, so that I can go and deliver him these same hard-learned lessons, as well.”

“You...you are dead,” Lear said, his brows narrowing. “Lord an’Clare has aligned himself with someone more powerful than you—greater than your king or any Comhar alliance. I offered you a quick reprieve and hope for Airrenigh. Without it—without me—there will be no end to your suffering, or hers.”

“Let them try,” Iasal seethed. The strange premonition he had suffered that morning echoed in his mind

I will not live to see the end of this year

but he shook it aside.

“I have walked this realm for one hundred and sixty-six years,” he told Lear. “I have lived through two wars, and fought a bloody damn giant. It will take a better man than you or Tressach an’Clare to cut me down—and a thousand-fold that besides to touch my family.”

He thought of his dream, of the unknown man assaulting Isbaenna, trying to rape her, and his own helplessness to prevent it or protect her. *Never*, he thought. *Not while I draw breath. Not ever.*

He rammed the cleadh mor forward, punching through Lear's chest, striking with deadly accuracy. The blade, tempered Elfin-steel forged centuries earlier, shoved through the man's breastbone and into the meat of his heart, killing him instantly. Lear uttered a soft, breathless gurgle and slipped sideways.

Iasal planted his boot sole against Lear's belly and kicked him back, jerking his sword free. "Peace and silence be damned—and honor besides," he said, spitting against Lear's fallen body. "Any man who would hurt my wife or child must get past me first."



Iasal leapt astride his horse once more, reining it out of the woods and back onto the highway. He caught Lear's steed by the harness and lashed it to his saddle, to return it in tow to Orinein. Just as he was about to kick his roan, spurring it into motion, his keen Elfin ears detected the sound of approaching hoof beats—multiple riders, at least four, from the sounds of it, and coming upon him fast from behind.

He did not know if Lear had been acting alone in his plan, if others among the Ciarrai County soldiers were traitors, or worse, if mercenaries eager to collect a hefty bounty were working with Lear, as well. The approaching riders might well be coming to meet Lear, to insure that he held to his end of the bargain with Tressach.

Iasal dismounted again and led both horses by the bridles into the woods. He led them deep into the thick trees and heavy underbrush, and fettered them to a pair of trees to keep them from sight. From the direction of the road, he heard the hoof beats slow to halts, and he strained his ears, listening.

He could discern voices overlapping in quiet conversation, but no distinct words. He glanced up into the pine trees overhead, and then moved, grasping a low-lying limb and swinging himself aloft. He had spent his entire youth in the venerable forests of the southrealm, and moved among the trees as swiftly and gracefully as a squirrel, dancing and darting from limb to limb, bough to bough, tree to tree, working his way higher, moving back toward the highway.

At last, Iasal found himself in a large pine near the road. He looked down upon a group of five riders, all dismounted and standing about in hooded riding cloaks. He watched one of them break away from his companions and head for the trees. Iasal pivoted and followed the man, creeping back among the tree boughs, letting them man lead him into the forest again.

He slid his hand along his belt, reaching for a dagger this time and leaving his cleadh mor sheathed. He squatted, poised on a fat, sturdy limb directly above the man in

the hooded cloak. He watched the man shrug aside the flap of his cape and wrestle momentarily with the drawcord of his breeches. Iasal saw a glimmer of sunlight against a sudden thin arc of liquid and heard it spattering against dried leaves as the man relieved his bladder.

The odds of the party stopping right there along the highway—nearly the exact same spot that Lear had chosen to pause—seemed well beyond any feasible coincidence to Iasal. None among the riders had been dressed in the uniforms of Ciarrai County soldiers, which left the possibility of mercenaries. Iasal did not know if this man and his companions were under Tressach’s employ or not, and could not simply find out from the observation. *But, by the Good Mother, I know how to find out.*

He clamped the dagger blade between his teeth, hooked his knees over the edge of the branch and leaned over backward, reaching beneath him and grabbing for another limb below. He caught it, swung his legs around, settling his boots silently against it, and from there, dropped quietly to the ground. He waited until the man had finished urinating, tucking himself back into his pants, and then sprang forward.

He clapped his hand against the man’s mouth and jerked his head back against his shoulder. The man uttered a muffled, startled mewl, but fell silent when Iasal pressed the dagger blade against his throat. “Do not move,” Iasal whispered into his ear.

The man rammed his elbow back, striking Iasal brutally in the sternum. It knocked the breath momentarily from him, and he choked, loosening his grasp on the man’s mouth. He felt the man buckle forward, closing his hands against Iasal’s arm, and then he folded himself toward the ground, throwing Iasal off his feet and over his shoulder.

Iasal hit the ground hard, rapping his head and *whoofing* the breath from his lungs again. He heard the scrape of metal as the man reached for his sword, and he kicked his leg out, punting the man directly, deliberately in the knee. The man cried out, his leg folding beneath him, and he crashed to the ground. He seemed as startled by Iasal’s attack as Iasal had been by his unexpected countermeasures, and they both scrambled to their feet simultaneously, each of them wrenching their swords from scabbards and shoving them at the other.

“Who are you?” Iasal shouted.

“I am an emissary of the King, riding in official capacity!” the man cried out, his voice hoarse and overlapping Iasal’s. His hood had fallen from his pate, revealing a headful of pale blond hair that fell past his shoulders in a heavy sheaf. His dark brown eyes were wide and startled; they widened all the more as he looked squarely at Iasal for the first time. “Iasal Gabhlan?” he asked, lowering the tip of his blade.

Iasal blinked in surprised recognition. It had been five years, and he had been a boy in those days, not the lean, muscular young man before him, but there was no mistaking him. “Rhyden?” he asked, and he, too, let his sword swing down toward the ground. “Rhyden Fabhcun?”

“Hoah, Little Eisos—!” a loud voice boomed, and then with a thunderous din of footsteps plowing through the underbrush, an enormous bear of a man charged into view, a broadsword clenched in his large, strong fist, his brows furrowed with murderous intensity.

His expression softened as he, too, caught sight of Iasal, and he grinned broadly, looking puzzled and pleased all at the same time. “Buion!” he exclaimed. “Hoah! Here is a surprise!”

“Eoghan?” Iasal asked, at a complete loss to see his friend. Another man rushed out from the thicket, a sword in his hand, his shoulder-length brown hair shot through with grey. “Dagarron?”

Dagarron Atreile, Iasal’s cousin by marriage, stumbled to an uncertain halt, looking from Iasal to Rhyden to Eoghan, and back around all over again. “What in the duchan...?” he said.

“Look what we have found, Dagarron!” Eoghan said, striding forward and clapping his heavy hand fondly against Iasal’s shoulder. “Leave it to the Buion to meet us half-ways and unawares! You bloody bastard, how did you know we were coming?”



“I will come with you,” Iasal said.

They had ridden to Orinein—Iasal, Eoghan, Rhyden and Dagarron, along with Dagarron’s wife, Wyndetta and Eoghan’s wife, Keena. Once back at the manor house, they had shared with each other all of the grim revelations that had come to pass, and at last, a larger—and darker—picture seemed to be made clear.

The spell book that had once belonged to Lahnduren’s witch-queen Ciardha had been found—the book of shadows—and Lahnduren was trying to claim it. He was amassing an army to the north, in the wilderlands of the Dithreabh, calling ever mercenary in the realm to his service to help him claim the book—and its sister talisman, the Shadow Stone—and overtake the throne of Tiralainn again.

And there is no great mystery who is helping Lahnduren rally this army, Iasal thought with a frown. Tressach an’Clare, the former Commander of the Comhar forces, a man with his own grudges to bear.

At least now he knew the meaning behind Lear’s enigmatic warning in the woods: *Lord an’Clare has aligned himself with someone more powerful than you—greater than your king or any Comhar alliance.*

Muise, Iasal thought. Indeed. He has allied himself with Lahnduren.

Rhyden had stopped in Nichten County before making his way to Orinein, collecting Dagarron Atreile and his wife, Wyndetta, as well as Trejaeran Muirel, the prince of Tiralainn, and an Elf with the strongest gift of the sight ever known. The Comhar was being reassembled, summoned by order from Kierken himself to meet at once in the royal city of Belgaeran, and it had obviously been Kierken’s hope that Trejaeran would be the cornerstone of whatever defense they rallied against Lahnduren’s army.

Trejaeran’s power had apparently swelled in the years since Iasal had last seen him. Rhyden had described him as having the ability to move things with his mind, and

while ancient Elves had once claimed such capabilities, Iasal had never heard of one who yet could do so. When Trejaeran had learned of the discovery of Ciardha's book of shadows, and that it had been entrusted with another ally, Orlaith, along the northernmost boundary of the Dithreabh territory, he had left by horseback to join Orlaith, to try and protect her and the book from Lahnduren.

"Sounds like trouble brewing all around, and war not too far behind it," Eoghan remarked in Iasal's library. "Good enough, then. Things were starting to get boring around here."

"Give me an hour to collect my things," Iasal told them. "And I will go with you." Airrenigh had wanted to go, too, but Iasal had refused.

"I am a member of the Comhar, too," she argued when they were alone in their room. She sat against the edge of the bed, watching from beneath narrowed brows as he stuffed a traveling bag with clothes. "I was summoned, the same as you."

"Airrenigh, le do thoil," he said. *Please*. He went to her, kneeling on the floor before her, slipping her hands against his own. "The road to Belgaeran is long, and there is no telling what we might expect along the way. We have prices on our heads now. It is not safe. I need you to stay here with Isbaenna at Orinein."

When she opened her mouth to protest further, he silenced her. "Lear said he meant for mercenaries to go after Isbaenna, too," he said. Airrenigh's eyes widened with aghast. She had been shocked to learn of what had happened to Iasal, of Lear's attack and her stepson's apparent culpability in it all. She was horrified by the revelations, and this apparently, came as one atop too many. She burst into tears, clapping her hands over her face.

"It is all my fault!" she gasped.

"No," he said, shaking his head. He gathered her in his arms, folding her against him. "Airrenigh, no. Do not say that. You are not to blame."

"But I...I am!" she cried. "I am the one who kept Lear in our service for so long. And I...I would not listen to you when you tried to tell me of Tressach. I did not want to believe it. I...I could not...!"

Iasal pressed his hands against her face and kissed her. "*Ciunas*," he whispered to her. *Hush*. "You could not have known, Airrenigh. You are not to blame."

“Maime?”

Isbaenna’s quiet voice from the doorway drew their startled gazes. The little girl stood upon the threshold, her blue eyes round and uncertain. “Why are you crying, Maime?”

Airrenigh struggled to smile, swatting at her eyes with her fingertips. “I...I am not crying, *inion*,” she said.

Isbaenna gave her a dubious look and then turned to Iasal, perfectly aware that he could not lie to her. “Why is Maime crying?”

Caught in a pinch, Iasal glanced at Airrenigh. “I...” he said helplessly. “I...I just...”

“He is going on a trip,” Airrenigh interjected, rising to her feet, her expression and voice brighter now. “Your father is leaving in just a bit, southward for Belgaeran to see the King. You remember Kierken, do you not, *inion*? And the Queen, Qynhelein? She is your cousin, somewhat removed.”

“I remember,” Isbaenna replied, nodding carefully, keeping Iasal pinned with her gaze. “Is Eoghan going with you, Daddy? And those others, too? Your friends?”

“Yes, *inion*,” Iasal said. He began to move again, fully aware of his daughter’s unwavering scrutiny as he resumed packing his bags. She was suspicious and perplexed, and their answers had assuaged naught.

“How long will you be gone?” Isbaenna asked.

“I do not know,” Iasal replied. This was not a lie. He did not know what the meeting in Belgaeran would bring. If they even survived at all to convene there. The ominous placard weighed heavily on his mind, as did his own peculiar premonition from earlier in the day.

I will not live to see her grow to womanhood.

I will not live to see the end of this year.

“It will be nice, do you not think, Isbaenna?” Airrenigh said cheerfully. “This great big manor house all to ourselves for a time. Maybe we can have a tea party in the garden.”

“That would be fun, would it not, *inion*?” Iasal asked, peeking around the side of the wardrobe door and rolling his eyes. He poked his tongue out and mimed that he

retched, trying to make Isbaenna laugh. Isbaenna was not a stupid child, however, and knew when her parents were trying to fool her. Her eyes shimmered with sudden tears and she spun around on her heel, darting off down the hall.

“Isbaenna...” Iasal began, ashamed of himself for having tried to trick her, and hurt by her reaction. He moved to go after her, but Airrenigh caught his arm, shaking her head.

“You finish packing,” she said. “I will talk to her. It will be alright.” She stepped against him briefly, kissing him. “You will see.”



But an hour came and went, and when Iasal met with his fellow members of the Comhar in the foyer at Orinein, his bags packed and in hand, there was no sign of Isbaenna.

“I do not understand,” Airrenigh said, frustrated and somewhat anxious by this point. “I have looked all over—all of her favorite hiding places! There is no sign of her!”

“She could not have slipped past the defensive walls,” Dagarron said, trying to reassure her. “She is here somewhere, Airrenigh, safe and sound.”

“I will look for her,” Eoghan said, striding toward the front doors. “She will not hide from me. She adores her Uncle Eoghan.” As he walked outside, he cupped his hand to his mouth and bellowed, “Isbaenna Gabhlan! Get your pint-sized ass over here right now and stop this bloody rot nonsense!”

“Splendid,” Wyndetta murmured, with a pointed glance at her husband. “Dagarron, why do you, Rhyden and Iasal not take the upstairs, and Keena, Airrenigh and I can search down here?”

“You two go ahead,” Iasal said to Dagarron and Rhyden. “I will check the garden.”



Iasal used his sight to guide him and found her where he suspected he might—along a leafy bough high atop a tree in the garden.

Like Iasal and all of her Elfin ancestors, Isbaenna was an adept climber, at least when the matter came to getting up such things as trees, but she was terrified by the prospect of falling once she had found herself a suitable perch. When it came time to come down, Isbaenna would literally freeze with fright; there had been numerous occasions when her boldness had carried her into the tree tops, only to wane and abandon her, and then Iasal would have to climb up and fetch her safely down once more.

“*Beannacht, inion,*” he said to her in greeting, moving silently among the tree boughs. He leaned backwards over a fat, crooked limb to look at her, and caught the branch by her feet with his hands. His shoulder-length, ivory hair fell about his head in a tumble and then he nimbly swung his legs down, his boots dropping gracefully against the bough. He knelt before her, smiling. She did not smile back, but merely blinked at him, her expression stubborn and stoic.

“Are you angry with me, *a’chailin mo’chroi?*” he asked her, calling her *my darling girl*.

“No,” Isbaenna said to him, her lips pinched in an unhappy pout.

“No?” he asked, and she shook her head. The corner of his mouth lifted in a smile again. “Tell me, then, *inion*, why are you up here in this tree?”

“I was chasing a butterfly,” she said with a shrug, pointing beyond his shoulder. He turned and spied a small, orange-spotted yellow butterfly perched further out upon the bough.

“That is a lovely one,” he said, raising his brow, admiring her find. “A *an’ime*, I think.” *A buttercup*. He stood, drawing his long legs beneath him and rising before her. Isbaenna watched as he walked out upon the limb, his feet light and heedless as he followed the slim expanse.

He reached out with his hand, cupping his palm in the direction of the sky as he drew near to the *an’ime*. He opened his mind, extending his sight. The butterfly was primitive and basic, with no cognizance to speak of, but he could still reach it with his mind, call it to him, just as he was able to sense the trees.

He heard Isbaenna gasp in wonder to watch it flutter from the leaves and toward his outstretched hand, heeding his soft beckon. It landed within the basin of his palm, batting its wings together slowly. Iasal turned around and saw her staring at him, agape and delighted, and he smiled, walking back to her.

He knelt before her, lowering the butterfly in his hand so that she could gaze upon it.

“Oh, Daddy,” she whispered breathlessly.

“Do you remember the difference between a butterfly and a moth?” he asked. “They are cousins, you know, but you can still tell them apart.”

“Butterflies stretch their wings up toward the Mathair Maith,” Isbaenna said quietly, transfixed by the butterfly as it pranced its miniscule feet against her father’s hand, tapping lightly, curiously against his wrist. “They can carry our whispers and wishes with them to the Good Mother’s ear.”

“*Maith thu,*” he told her softly, making her flush with his praise. *Very good.* “What of moths?”

“Their wings lay out flat, like this,” Isbaenna said, demonstrating by pressing the heels of her palms together and fanning her hands apart, parallel to the ground below. “And they like to dance in the moonlight. That is when they have their balls and cotillions.”

“Indeed,” he agreed, chuckling.

“I...I do not want you to leave, Daddy,” she whispered at him all at once.

He looked at her, and there was such bewildered sorrow in her eyes that his heart nearly broke. “I know, inion,” he said. “I wish I did not have to leave, but I must. It is important. My friends need my help, Isbaenna, and I cannot refuse.” He reached out with his free hand and caressed her cheek lightly with the cuff of his fingers. “I will not be gone long, back before you even miss me.”

“I miss you already,” she whimpered, and she began to cry. “Please do not go, Daddy.”

“Oh, Isbaenna,” he whispered and he touched her hair. He felt the dim heat of his own tears, and he blinked against them. “Look at me, *inion, le do thoil,* do not cry. Please.”

She looked up at him, her large blue eyes flooded and he tried to smile for her. He thought again of the premonition he had suffered that morning, the icy voice whispering inside of his mind, the grim promise he could not bear to believe possible.

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“It is only this vessel that leaves you,” he had said, cupping his hand against her face. “For my heart, *inion*...my heart will always be with you and your Maime. Always, Isbaenna. Nothing in all of the Bith—not even my own life—is more precious to me. Whenever you have need of me, my mind, my heart are yours. You have only to whisper to the butterflies and I will know.”

He drew his palm towards his face, letting the butterfly’s wings tickle against his lips. “When you are lonely for me, *inion*, you can call to them: ‘*glaceann tu mo focalan chuige a speir*’—take my words to the sky—and they will come to you. Let their wings brush your lips, and it will be as my kisses to you. Whisper your wishes to them, and they will find me, no matter where I am, and I will know of them.”

“*Glaceann tu mo focalan chuige a speir*,” she repeated quietly, and he nodded at her, smiling.

“Then set them free, *inion*,” he said softly, and he gave his hand a light, gentle toss and the butterfly flew from his palm, fluttering up among the leaves, following a meandering course toward the sky. “And they will find me.”

Isbaenna threw her arms around his neck, hugging him fiercely. “I love you, Daddy,” she gasped against his ear.

Iasal closed his eyes, clutching her against him, wishing with all of his heart that he could hold her forever. He had already defied the dark premonition of his death once that day. Eoghan had spoken truly; war was on the horizon, and Iasal did not know if he could defy that same ominous destiny again and again, not in those circumstances.

He gathered Isbaenna in his arms and began to climb down the tree. “I love you, too,” he whispered. *No matter what happens, I am with you*, he thought. *I will protect you—by my breath, my honor and my life, I swear to you. Always, Isbaenna.*



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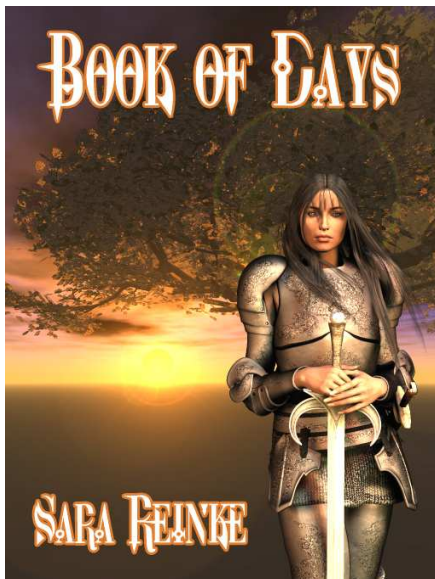
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