

Book of Shadows

A TALE FROM THE CHRONICLES OF TIRALAINN



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The year 1733 of the Third Age

Rhyden Fabhcun awoke, drenched in sweat, wide-eyed and gasping, his mind seized, his body frozen with blind and inexplicable terror. Whatever dream had manifested itself in his mind to cause such frantic fear was abruptly forgotten, and he lay in the dark, blinking up at an unfamiliar ceiling, struggling to reclaim his wind and wits.

Gloucester, he thought. *I am in Gloucester, some little piss-rot village on the west end of I'lar County. I stopped for the night and rented a room on my way from Iarnrod to Edenvale.*

These thoughts, coming to mind in a calm, cool voice, immediately soothed his anxiety, and Rhyden closed his eyes. His breath escaped him in a huff and his pressed the heel of his hand against his brow. He remembered clearly now, and felt somewhat foolish for his momentary fright. He had spent the last two days trekking nearly non-stop by horseback from the Abhacan province of Tirurnua toward the midrealm of Tiralainn. He was a royal ambassador for the King and Queen of Tiralainn to Tirurnua; at twenty-one years of age, he was the youngest such appointed delegate in the history of the realm. It was a post he had held for the past five years—so long, that he was no longer even aware of the diminutive status of his Abhacan constituents—or *Dwarves*, as they were often called in the crude vernacular. In fact, back among the menfolk and Elves of Tiralainn, Rhyden had found himself the past two days more acutely aware of their heights in proportion to his own lean, six-foot-two frame than any of the Abhacan.

He heard a woman's soft, sleepy murmur beside him, and felt the straw-filled mattress beneath him shift as someone moved, snuggling near. A hand draped out from beneath the coverlets, falling lightly against the flat, muscled plain of his stomach. Rhyden opened one eye and glanced to his right, all at once remembering something else about the night before.

What is her name? Maiwen? Meghan? It started with an *M*, of that Rhyden was fairly certain. He had been well into his cups when he had struck up a conversation with the woman at the Gloucester village pub, and drunker than this besides several hours later, when he had invited her back to his room at the inn. She had seemed pretty to him at the time, her body appealing enough for his immediate needs—thick, soft, meaty hips, enormous breasts, talented hands, an eager mouth and an enthusiastic stamina that had left him exhausted and spent several times over.

Maeve? Maire? What in the duchar is her name?

He hated it when he could not remember their names.

Although he traveled frequently between the Tiralainn capital of Belgaeran, and the Tirurnuan royal city of Iarnrod, it had been at least a year since Rhyden had last taken a woman of menfolk or Elfin height to his bed; his tendency to overlook the small stature of the Abhacans in Tirurnua extended toward their women, as well, and he had found, much to his delight, that being short in no way proved them unsatisfactory lovers. Quite the contrary, in fact. *They straddle you quite comfortably*, he thought, as he considered that the woman beside him

What is her name, damn it?

had also had neither reservations nor inability in that respect.

Rhyden looked up at the ceiling, watching the pale play of moonlight wafting in through the window in splayed geometric patterns against the plaster. He struggled to remember the dream that had roused him, because one thing he clearly recalled was that it had not felt like a dream at all. It had felt vividly, starkly real to him, more like something witnessed or remembered, and that is what had terrified him the most.

The anam'cladh, he thought, a fleeting image darting through his mind of a sword hilt, silver and unadorned, no blade rising from the tang. *It had something to do with the anam'cladh. I dreamed I was in Belgaeran, at the palace, trying to steal the anam'cladh.*

Why he would have dreamed of taking the weapon was beyond him. The anam'cladh, the fabled *sword of the soul* belonged to Qynhelein Mailp, the Queen of Tiralainn. Its blade was magically forged, a spear of fire that would spring to life only in certain hands—those directly descended from the ancient and one-time immortal beings who had originally forged it.

And there are only two people alive who can claim that ancestry, Rhyden thought. The Queen, Qynh was one of them.

Her twin brother, Trejaeran, was the other.

Rhyden was a Gaeilge Elf, blessed like his entire race with preternaturally accelerated reflexes and healing abilities, a modicum of mental telepathy known as *the sight* and the inherent inability to lie or steal. His intrinsic honesty made him a naturally effective negotiator in ambassadorial negotiations. It also made his dream about trying to steal Qynh's sword even more peculiar.

Because I could not bloody steal if I wanted to.

He might have wondered about it, worried further, had the woman—*Mena, Moira, Merewin, whatever the duchan her name is*—not murmured again, her voice decidedly less sleepy this time. Her hand moved, sliding down his belly, stealing beneath the edge of blankets swathed around his hips. She moved lower yet, and Rhyden closed his eyes, drawing in a hissing breath between his teeth as she found her mark, her fingers curling about him with firm and sudden promise. She ducked her head beneath the blankets, following her hand, and he moaned, closing his hands into helpless fists in the bed-clothes. For the better part of the next hour thereafter, the dream—and everything else in the world, for that matter—was fairly well forgotten.



The sky had just started to lighten along the horizon with the encroaching dawn when Rhyden stole out of the bed. He left the woman sleeping alone, her face tucked against a pillow, her hair a tumble of dark curls fanned about her head. He blinked about in the dim light, trying to find wherever he'd thrown or kicked his clothes the night before. His hair fell in a thick, heavy sheaf of pale blond hair to the middle of his back; he tucked wayward shanks behind the tapered points of his Elfin ears as he crept across the room to retrieve his pants. He found his shirt on the opposite end of the room, his boots near the threshold, his long, cerulean wool topcoat in a rumpled heap at the end of the bed. He dressed quickly, silently, strapping his sword belt around his waist and bending over to fetter the sheath of his sword—a gleaming silver blade that had belonged

to his father—to his thigh. When he glanced up, he found his lover looking at him, still lying in bed, her head propped up somewhat as she watched him groggily.

His Elfin healing had long since dissolved any lingering effects of his gross overindulgence in alcohol from the night before. The woman was human, however, and clearly, she was still drunk somewhat in part, and more than a little miserable from too many shots of brimague. She blinked at him blearily, her face twisted in a half-pout, half-grimace as he pulled on his boots.

“You are leaving?” she asked, her voice hoarse and croaking.

Rhyden awarded her a kindly smile. “Yes, love,” he replied. “I have appointments to keep in the west.”

Her frown deepened as he shrugged his way into the blue jacket. He had not been wearing it the night before at the pub. The color was reserved for government officials, and representatives of the Crown. To her limited experience as a countryside peasant, this could only mean one thing. “You a tax collector?”

It was too much trouble and would take far too much effort to explain things in a fashion she would appreciate or understand, so Rhyden simply smiled again. “You can call me that, yes,” he said.

As an Elf, he could not lie, but he had long since learned to answer in truths that best suited his purposes, when the occasion called for such. As this one seemed to. He hadn’t lied to the woman, necessarily. There was nothing to prevent her from calling him a tax collector if she wished.

“Oh,” the woman said, nodding once. She looked decidedly troubled. “Don’t know that I would have come back with you last night had I known that.”

Tax collectors were unwelcome in any village, because money was hard-earned in Tiralainn, and the collectors took what many considered to be more than a fair share. When Rhyden leaned over the bed to offer the woman a buss in lieu of farewell, she turned her head, flapping her hand to shoo him. *So much for any hope of a last suckle and swallow*, he thought. *And I suppose I will never learn her name now, either.*

He did not like good-byes and seldom, if ever, extended them, and so he left her there without another word, shouldering his traveling knap sack over one shoulder and closing the door behind him.



He rode until midmorrow before reaching Nichten County. His mission was grim, if not somewhat simple. He was under directive from the King of Tiralainn himself—Kierken Mailp—to deliver seven people to Belgaeran within the fortnight: five menfolk and two Elves, those who had, five years earlier, comprised the heart of what had been known as the Council of the Comhar.

At that time, Kierken and his Queen, Qynh, had not ruled Tiralainn. Rather, the throne had been held by a ruthless and sadistic liege, Lahnduren—uncle to Qynh and her brother, Trejaeran, and an Elf who had murdered their parents and stolen the Crown from them. At Lahnduren's side had been a witch named Ciardha, one of the last of the ancient immortal Na'Siogai race from which Qynh and Trejaeran had descended.

The Council of the Comhar had been an alliance of menfolk and Elves, gathered together from some of the most powerful and influential clans in the midrealm. They had been united in their determination to overthrow Lahnduren and his witch-queen, Ciardha. With the help of the twin heirs, Trejaeran and Qynh, they had eventually been able to do so.

The Comhar had disbanded following this triumph, but the alliance had never fully dissolved. They remained a core of loyal followers to the King and Queen, Kierken and Qynh's staunchest allies in times of need.

Which this certainly is, Rhyden thought as his horse plodded along the narrow, winding highway leading toward the village of Edenvale. It had begun to rain shortly after his departure from Gloucester, and he'd donned a heavy wool cloak in a vain attempt to keep dry. He rode with his shoulders hunched, the woolen folds drawn about him, his hood pulled low to hide his face in shadows. It was springtime, but the air was chilled, and he was cold from the rain.

Ciardha had not survived the overthrow of her rule. Qynh had run her through with the anam'cladh—the only way to end the life of a Na'Siogai. It was believed that her king, Lahnduren, had died, as well—at least until recently. Now rumors would peg Lahnduren still alive and well, and amassing a terrible army numbering in the thousands

out in the untamed wilderness of Tiralainn's Dithreabh territory—an army of renegades and mercenaries bent on helping him reclaim the throne.

If ever Kierken and Qynh need their allies, it is now, Rhyden thought. And foremost among them would be Qynh's brother, Trejaeran. He commanded a formidable gift of the sight—Elfin telepathy, the strongest of any Elf ever known. During the overthrow of Ciardha and Lahnduren, Trejaeran had fallen prey to Ciardha's dark magic, a force known as the Shadow which she had commanded. She had tainted the waters of Tiralainn with this Shadow, and forged an army for herself from those forced to drink of it. These hapless souls became cursed with *the duchar*, the Shadow incarnate in their systems, a black ichor that eventually overtook their forms, dissolving flesh and sinew down to the bone.

Trejaeran had been spared this grim fate, but many—including those who had once called the young man their ally and friend—wondered about the lingering effects of such dark magic upon Trejaeran's soul. Or more specifically, on the incredible, insurmountable power he was able to command freely and at will. It was no secret that many among the former Council of the Comhar—including some Rhyden had been dispatched to deliver to Belgaeran—believed Trejaeran to be more of a threat than an asset to his sister's reign.

Rhyden was not among them. Trejaeran had been Rhyden's best childhood friend, and though they remained now in only sporadic contact through letters, Rhyden still held fierce and unwavering confidence in his friend. Thus, despite the rain and cold, even though his horse slogged through deep ruts of thick mud, and despite the prospect of swiftly impending war, Rhyden still felt a measure of hope.

Trejaeran lived with his father on the modestly sized farm upon which he'd grown up, just outside of Edenvale proper. Rhyden's childhood had been spent upon a neighboring farm, once tended by his father, and now owned by one of the former Comhar members he had been sent to rally, a man named Dagarron Atreile, a cousin to Trejaeran and Qynh.

I will kill two birds with one arrow, Rhyden thought. *Three, if you count Wyndetta*. He planned to stay the night with Trejaeran in as friendly a visit as one could manage, given the circumstances, and from there, to ride westward and collect Dagarron

with Trejaeran in tow. Dagarron's wife, Wyndetta, had also been called, so the four of them would then travel south, to Ciarrai County, where they would collect the remaining Comhar council members summoned to the palace—an Elf named Iasal Gabhlan, his wife, Airrenigh, a man named Eoghan Drouin and his wife, Keena.

The King of Tirurnua, an Abhacan named Neisrod would be waiting for them in Belgaeran, to relay to them all of the grim circumstances that had come to pass.

The Book, Rhyden thought, a shiver racing through his form. *The Book of Shadows has been found, and that is in part, why Lahnduren has assembled his army. He means to claim the Book, and with it, find the Shadow Stone—and then claim the Crown.*

He was surprised by what he found when he reached the fenceline of the Muirel farm. Petrich Muirel, Trejaeran's father, had always been a diligent farmer, tending to his fields and property no matter the season or weather. But his slat fence, always so meticulously maintained to Rhyden's memory, now looked dilapidated and sorely neglected, the timbers rotting and splintered, broken and fallen away in places. The fields in which Petrich had once tended impressive acreages of barley, legumes, flax and straw now all lay barren and overgrown, unplowed and untended for many long seasons, from the looks of things.

What in the duchar? Rhyden thought, frowning, pushing the hem of his cloak hood back somewhat along his forehead, his brows narrowing as he scanned the property with his gaze. *It looks abandoned, like no one has touched it since the war.*

It was not as if Petrich needed to continue farming, though, Rhyden realized. As the Queen's brother, Trejaeran was undoubtedly entitled to all manner of privileges—and not paying taxes was likely among them. With no need to remit taxes on the land, it cost Petrich and Trejaeran nothing to let it lie fallow and unused.

Still, he had a difficult time imagining that Petrich would resign himself to a life of inactivity. *But then again, what do I know of Petrich these past years?* Rhyden thought. *Ciardha forced her tainted waters on him, too—he has tasted of the Shadow and survived, just like Trejaeran. Who knows what effects the duchar had on him that linger yet?*

He found a heavy wooden gate blocking the lane leading from the highway back to the Muirel farm house. This was something new, not only to Rhyden's observation, but

obviously in the construction, as well. Thick links of black iron chains held it firmly closed, clearly forbidding the passage of any visitors.

A large wooden sign had been nailed firmly in place on the gate, with words painted on it in bold red letters: *Na deantar treaspas*, it read in Gaeilgen, the native language of the Elves. *No trespassing*.

Beneath this, someone had nailed the carcass of a cat, driving a stake through its skull to pin it to the wood. It had been disemboweled, its liver and lights left to hang from the torn maw of its gullet in a grim tangle. From the smell of things, it had been there for awhile. Rhyden drew the side of his hand toward his face, grimacing as the stench of fervent decay struck him.

What in the duchar? he thought, puzzled and uneasy. There was a scrap of wood hanging by yarn around the cat's neck. Rhyden swung his leg gracefully around and dismounted from his horse, Dherga. The tall white stallion shuffled its hooves in the mud and snuffled, clearly made anxious by the stink of death. Rhyden patted the horse's nose in reassurance, opening his mind to it, using his limited—and admittedly weak—telepathic abilities to offer it comfort.

"Ta se maith," he murmured to it aloud in Gaeilgen. *It is alright*.

He slogged through the mud, sinking in deeply, nearly to his ankles in the thick muck, to reach the gate. He pressed the edge of his cloak against his mouth and nose in a futile attempt to block the stench. He unsheathed a dagger from his belt and used the tip of the blade to nudge the wooden sign hanging around the dead cat's neck, to turn it so he could read it clearly.

Draiodoir, it said simply. *Witch*.

"What in the duchar...?" Rhyden whispered, his disconcertion rapidly yielding out and out to alarm. Trejaeran or Petrich might have put up the gate, the no trespassing sign, but someone else had done this—someone with obviously malicious intent.

He returned to his horse, slipping the reins in hand and leading Dherga on foot past the gate. He stepped away from the muddy road, tromping through the waist-deep grass, sloshing across the mired ground beneath as he followed the fenceline. He found a place where the top rail had rotten and fallen away; a few quick jerks against the middle beam, and it, too, fell. He led Dherga over the rail remaining, and then did his best to seal

the open space behind them by returning the rotten plank of wood to its original place. Clearly, if anyone with vindictive motives against Trejaeran or his father wanted to trespass upon the farm and reach them, it would be a simple matter to do so, but Rhyden decided not to give them an all-too-inviting means in any case.

I do not know what in the bloody duchar is going on around here, he thought, leading the horse across the field and shrugging his shoulders to draw his cloak more tightly about him against the rain. *But by the Good Mother, I mean to find out.*



The Muirel farmhouse looked to be in better condition than its surrounding fences and pastures, but it was still a far cry from the well-tended homestead that Rhyden recalled from his youth. He had not stepped foot on the property in five years, not since the day of Trejaeran's sixteenth birthday, when Ciardha's army of duchan-infected soldiers had at found him and attacked, murdering Trejaeran's mother and abducting Petrich, his father.

The winding lane leading to the house was little more than an overgrown, muddy stripe cleaved through the field. Rhyden could see the porch planks of the house sagging visibly, in need of repair, and in places, the thatch of the roof looked matted and weathered to the point of near-bareness. The window shutters were all closed and tightly fastened. Despite the chill, Rhyden could see no smoke from the chimney to indicate any fire stoked inside—or any life for that matter. A glance about the side yards revealed no animals put out to graze, none of the cattle, sheep or pigs Rhyden remembered the Muirels keeping.

In fact, had it not been for the matter of the large haybale floating in the air behind the house, visible over the low-pitched peak of the roof, Rhyden would have thought the farm abandoned altogether.

He blinked at the haybale, stopped in his tracks, certain he was imagining things. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, and yet, the hay remained, a broad square, neatly bundled with twine, hovering at least twenty feet skyward. Rhyden let Dherga's reins fall away from his hand, letting the stallion wander of its own accord to graze, and tromped through the thick, tall grass around the side of the house.

As he approached the back yard and the barns, he realized the haybale had company. More than a dozen floated lazily in the air, as if caught in the buoyant current of some invisible sea. Rocks and pebbles littered the air, as well, along with sticks and

leaves, empty buckets, sacks of grain feed and seed. Rhyden looked all around him in wide-eyed, disbelieving wonder, feeling very much as if he'd just stepped off the edge of the known world and into some fantastic, other realm.

What in the bloody duchan...? he thought, reaching up and tapping a small, flat stone as it drifted past his face. At his fingertip's touch, the pebble spun lazily, careening slowly off course and floating away.

What is this? Rhyden thought, and then he saw a figure standing just inside the open doorway of the barn. It had been five years, but there was no mistaking his friend's headful of dark hair, as tousled and uncombed now as it had ever been. Rhyden smiled, reaching for his hood, meaning to push it back from his face.

"Trejaeran!" he called out. "Hoah, bidein! It is—"

His voice cut off in a sharp, breathless snap as what felt like an unseen iron hand clamped against his throat, crushing the wind and voice from him. He flew backwards, plowed off his feet by this same tremendous, invisible force, and when he smashed mightily against the side wall of the house, his head hit with enough force to rattle the wits from him.

Rhyden gagged for breath, suspended a good two feet off the ground. He pawed helplessly at his throat, struggling desperately for air, unable to squeeze even a fleeting measure past that terrible, terrifying force.

And then, as suddenly as it had come upon him, it was gone. Rhyden sucked in a loud, whooping mouthful of air, and then crashed to the ground, landing hard, crumpling to his hands and knees. He clutched at his throat, choking and gasping.

"Rhyden?"

He looked up, his gaze bleary with tears, and saw Trejaeran walking toward him. They had both been little more than boys, each sixteen years old, when last they'd met face to face. Like Rhyden, Trejaeran had long-since lost any hint of that child in his form or features. Although he had always been shorter than Rhyden—hence, Rhyden's affectionate nickname of *bidein* for him, which was Gaeilgen for *little nip*—in the last five years, Trejaeran had grown to nearly match Rhyden in height and build. His hair hung to his shoulders in heavy, unkempt waves. His striking blue eyes, the color of a clear summer's sky, were framed in shadows beneath his narrowed brows.

Mother Above, he looks like he has lost his mind, Rhyden thought.

Trejaeran brought the blade of his hand up to his face, squinting slightly as he studied Rhyden, as if Rhyden cast some kind of light Trejaeran found painful to gaze upon. After a moment of obvious uncertainty, Trejaeran smiled, the tension relaxing from his shoulders. Simultaneously, every haybale, rock, stick and feed sack that had been floating in the air came tumbling to the ground, falling in a sudden, pattering rainfall from the sky.

“Bugger me, it is you!” Trejaeran exclaimed, rushing forward. “Mother Above, I am sorry! I did not realize who you were at first! I thought you were one of the townsfolk sneaking around again! Are you alright?”

“I...I am fine, bidein,” Rhyden wheezed. He managed a weak smile as Trejaeran reached for him, offering his hand. “Your power...it has grown.”

Trejaeran laughed. “No—I have,” he replied. “I have learned how to control it better all this while.”

He helped Rhyden stumble to his feet and embraced him warmly, clutching at him with the fervency a drowning man usually reserved for a rescuer. He clapped his hand against Rhyden’s back. “Hoah, I have missed you,” he breathed against Rhyden’s shoulder.



“Poppa, look who is here!” Trejaeran called as he led Rhyden through the back door and into the house. Petrich was not in the kitchen, where they entered, and offered no immediate reply.

“You are soaked—take that cloak off,” Trejaeran said to Rhyden. He walked about briskly, trying somewhat ashamedly to tidy the messy room, shoving dirty plates and bowls aside from the table and flapping his hand to shoo flies. Rhyden watched a fairly good-sized rat scurry away from Trejaeran’s boot stomps, ducking beneath a nearby cupboard to hide. “How is your family? Your father and mother? You have a brother now, too, do you not?”

“Yes,” Rhyden said. “A baby brother, in fact. He is only five years old. His name is Taemir. He and my parents are all well enough.”

“Have you seen anyone else yet?” Trejaeran asked. His tone was warm enough and he was grinning, but his eyes remained somewhat cool and curious, as if he was pleased by his friend’s unexpected arrival, but wary of it nonetheless. “Dagarron and Wyndetta? Will you be stopping by Orinein, too?”

“No to the former, yes to the latter,” Rhyden replied. “I wanted to stop here first and see you.”

“Oh.” Again, Trejaeran looked at him, smiling on the surface, but cautiously puzzled beneath. “Well, let me get some wood, a fire started. I will draw some water from the well for tea, too.”

“Really, bidein, do not go to any bother...” Rhyden began, but Trejaeran walked back outside, closing the door abruptly behind him, cutting him off in mid-protest.

What has happened to you, Trejaeran? Rhyden thought, his heart aching. He unfastened his pennanular brooch and drew the sodden folds of his cloak away from his shoulders. He glanced around uncertainly, frowning somewhat at the lingering smell of rotting food, before settling on the back of a chair upon which to drape the cloak. He looked around, and the more he saw, the more sorrow seized him. The house was in shambles, the corners lined with cobwebs, the floor so coated in dust and dirty that footpaths marked by those paths most frequently followed from room to room were visibly apparent. He could smell the distinctive odor of mildew underlying the more pervasive stench of decay; the roof was in worse shape than he had originally thought. In urgent need of rethatching, the straw above had long since grown sodden and molded.

How many days had Rhyden once spent in that house—that very kitchen, as near and dear to him in boyhood as his own? It pained him now to see it in such a sorry state; to see his beloved friend in much the same way. *Mother Above, what has happened?*

Rhyden crossed to the window and looked outside, watching Trejaeran across the yard beside the barn, gathering an armload of firewood. He could see a large clay pitcher floating in the air beside the well, the gears of the well wheel turning of their own accord, raising the bucket from the watery depths. *Trejaeran is doing that with his mind, he realized, stunned breathless. How is that possible?*

He heard the soft scuffle of footsteps behind him and he started to turn. A large, heavy hand clapped firmly against his mouth, startling him, shoving him back against the cupboards. He saw the wink of muted light filtering through the window off of a blade, and then the edge of a knife pressed against his throat, tucked beneath the shelf of his jaw.

“That light,” Petrich Muirel hissed, leaning toward him, nearly nose to nose. If Rhyden had been shocked by Trejaeran’s appearance, he was even more so by that of his father. Petrich looked absolutely deranged, bordering on feral, his eyes wild and red-rimmed, the lower quadrant of his face obscured beneath a wild growth of beard. His hair hung past his shoulders, a tangled, matted nest, and from the looks—and smell—of things, he had not bathed or changed his clothes for the better part of a month.

“Petrich,” Rhyden said as Petrich’s hand slipped away from his mouth. “Petrich, it is me, sir—Rhyden Fabhcun, Eisos’ son. You know me—”

“That light,” Petrich said again, and Rhyden jerked in repulsed surprise as he suddenly pressed his nose against the side of his face, sniffing him the way a dog would. “It is golden—wondrous. So beautiful. Where is it coming from? Why is it in you?”

Rhyden could have dislodged Petrich. Once chosen to join an exclusive and ancient Elfin aicmeach, or sect, of warriors known as the Buion, Rhyden had trained extensively in hand-to-hand combat and weaponplay over the last years. Petrich outweighed him, but what had once been hardened muscles earned through exhaustive labor had softened over time. It would not have taken much to force the blade from Rhyden’s neck, to drive Petrich back, but Rhyden did not want to hurt him. He looked mad, as if his mind had broken long ago and he had lived in its empty, haunted shell ever since—and more than this, all at once, Petrich looked desperately sad, as if some manner of profound and tremendous grief had suddenly overwhelmed him.

“Le do thoil, sir,” Rhyden said. *Please*. “Put the blade down.”

Petrich blinked at Rhyden, and then lowered the knife, letting it tumble from his fingers to the floor with a clatter. His eyes swam with tears. “Where is it coming from?” he whispered, his voice a hoarse plea. “It is beautiful—you are beautiful for it.” He dropped to his knees, startling Rhyden as he tucked his forehead against the younger

Elf's thighs as if seeking solace or shelter, shuddering against him. "Please, will you not have mercy on me?"

"Poppa," Trejaeran said from the doorway, trundling firewood inside. He blinked, seeming as surprised as Rhyden to find his father prostrating himself at Rhyden's feet. "Poppa, what are you doing? Get up, le do thoil."

Petrich did as he was told. He kept his shoulders hunched, ashamedly, and spared Rhyden one last plaintive, piteous glance before turning to duck back into the living room. Trejaeran set the wood down at the hearth and caught him by the shoulders before he could find escape, however.

"Poppa, it is Rhyden Fabhcun come to see us," he said with a gentle smile, steering his father around to face Rhyden once more. "You remember Rhyden. It has been some time, but I know you must."

Petrich nodded. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I recall."

"Go put on a fresh shirt, Poppa," Trejaeran said. "See if you cannot clean up a bit. Rhyden has come all of this way."

Petrich nodded again, then turned, leaving the room. Trejaeran looked after him for a long moment, then turned to Rhyden, his expression sheepish. "I...I am sorry for that," he said. "I hope he did not frighten you. He...he has been unwell these past months."

Rhyden said nothing, uncertain of what to say. *Frighten* was not the effect Petrich had on him; *dismay* was more appropriate. He watched Trejaeran kneel beside the fireplace and begin lining the creek stone hearthbed with kindling.

"He said something about a light," Rhyden said at length, not missing the fleeting but distinctive tension that seized Trejaeran's shoulders. "He said it was in me, that I was beautiful for it. What did he mean?"

Trejaeran glanced back at him, then away again, shaking his head. "I...I do not know," he replied.

Elves could not lie, but Trejaeran was not fully Elfin. His mother had been a Gaeilge Elf of the royal bloodline directly descended from the Na'Siogai immortals, but his father had been a man. Menfolk could lie, and so could Trejaeran. Although there had once been a time when Rhyden would have sworn this impossible nonetheless, he had the

sudden and distinctive impression that was precisely what Trejaeran was doing at the moment.

“He has not always been like this, but these past few months have been hard,” Trejaeran said suddenly, quietly, his voice strained. He fell still, and did not turn to face his friend. “They have taken their toll.”

Rhyden thought about the dead cat nailed to the gate, the ominous, if not ambiguous note left around its neck: *Draiodoir*. Witch. He thought of what Trejaeran had said to him out in the yard, after he’d attacked him with his mind. *I thought you were one of the townsfolk sneaking around again.*

Rhyden went to Trejaeran’s side, genuflecting, draping his hand against his friend’s shoulder. “What has happened, bidein?” he asked. Trejaeran only shook his head, his brows furrowed, his lips pressed together in a thin line.

“Trejaeran, le do thoil,” Rhyden whispered, his brows lifting. “Tell me.”

Trejaeran clapped his hand over his eyes and shuddered. “Help me, Rhyden!” he gasped. “Oh, Mother Above, Poppa has gone mad, and I...I think I have, too!”



“It all began last fall,” Trejaeran said. He and Rhyden sat facing one another at the kitchen table. He cradled a clay mug between his hands and watched, his blue eyes distant with memory as Rhyden poured him a spot of tea.

“It had been a dry summer,” he said. “But the farmers around here had managed to make due with some good yields on late-season barley crops. Before the harvest, though, the rains came and they didn’t stop. It has been like this...” He motioned with his hand toward the window. “Nearly non-stop ever since. The fall harvest was ruined, the crops all drowned. The winter was bitter, and now the spring has been sodden. No one can even get out to turn the ground with a harrow, much less plant or plow.”

He glanced at Rhyden. “They say it is my fault.”

“What?” Rhyden raised his brow. “Who says that, bidein? Why would they think—”

“The entire village says that,” Trejaeran said. “And most of the surrounding county besides. They all know about what happened at the end of the war. They know Poppa and I tasted of the duchan, that we were touched by Ciardha’s dark magic. And they know what I can do now. I have tried to keep it secret, the breadth of my sight, but the rumors have persisted.”

Rhyden thought of the state of the back yard upon his arrival, the air filled with floating stones, sticks and haybales, and wondered how this constituted “secrecy” in Trejaeran’s estimation.

“People know what Ciardha’s magic did to the land,” Trejaeran said. “How her duchan-tainted waters cursed the trees, created the black forest of the Dubhole’crainn. They have heard all of the stories, even this far north.” He shrugged, looking down into his tea cup. “I suppose they think that if Ciardha could do it, then someone touched by her could, too.”

“That is ridiculous, bidein,” Rhyden said. “Your power did not come from Ciardha. It has always been yours—long before Ciardha and the duchar. You only learned to unleash it, control it, during the war, when Qynh purged the duchar from you with the fire of the anam’cladh.”

Trejaeran nodded. “But magic is magic,” he said quietly. “The people here are mostly superstitious sorts who do not care for the quibbling details. To them, magic is magic. And I am to blame.”

He met Rhyden’s gaze again. “They have tried to run us off,” he said. “I am sure you saw their latest gift left nailed to our gate?” When Rhyden nodded, he smiled with little humor. “That is not the worst of things I have found. They have not summoned mettle enough to cross my fenceline and come to the house, but they will eventually. I am certain of that. Superstition begets ignorance, which breeds hatred, which leads to violence. I am not worried for what they might try to do to me, but Poppa...”

His voice faded, his eyes settling again on his tea cup. With a sigh, he pushed the cup away and stood. “I feel the need for something stronger,” he remarked. He raised his brow at Rhyden in invitation. “Care to join me for a brimague?”



“Does Dagarron know?” Rhyden asked. He had traded his wehnroot tea for three generous shots of brimague in rapid succession, and now enjoyed the pleasant, confident warmth that the bitter-flavored liquor sent seeping through his form.

He could not imagine that Dagarron would not know of such things as Trejaeran had described, or that the man would not have tried in some fashion to protect Trejaeran and Petrich. That had been his primary purpose in moving to Edenvale five years earlier, in fact. He had turned down a generous appointment to the King’s personal counsel in order to remain close, to keep a watchful eye on Trejaeran.

“Yes,” Trejaeran said with a nod. “But there is nothing he can do besides offer his protest and declare his support. No one has yet been bold enough to claim the credit for their acts, and like I said, no one has crossed the fenceline.”

“So far,” Rhyden reminded.

Trejaeran poured them each a fresh shot of brimague. “So far,” he repeated in agreement. He lifted his tumbler in hand and tapped it against Rhyden’s. “Slainte,” he said in toast.

“Slainte,” Rhyden murmured, pressing the rim of his cup against his lips and tilting his head back, feeling the burning trail of liquor sear down his throat. He looked at Trejaeran for a long moment, watching as his friend refilled their glasses yet again. “What if I told you they may not be so far off the mark?” he asked, drawing Trejaeran’s curious gaze. “Your superstitious townsfolk. What if I told you perhaps Ciardha’s magic, the Shadow, somehow is to blame?”

Trejaeran settled back in his chair. “I...I do not understand.”

Rhyden sighed, forking his fingers through the heavy crown of his hair. “You said these troubles began last fall, did you not? Near the harvest? That is about the time the Abhacan discovered something buried beneath the Midland Mountains. They were drilling for new silver mines and stumbled upon a hidden network of caves.”

“Something?” Trejaeran asked.

Rhyden nodded. “Something of Ciardha’s, though no one realized it at the time. It was a book, plated in gold, written in a language no one had ever seen before. Orlaith said it was the tongue of the Na’Siogai.”

Trejaeran’s brows raised in surprise. “Orlaith?”

Orlaith was the last living Na’Siogai, eternally doomed to a meager circumference of land in the northernmost corner of the realm, a place of unending penance for a crime she had committed before Elves and men had even walked the Bith. She had been Ciardha’s sister, and the one who had bestowed upon Trejaeran the gift of the anam’cladh, the sword that had eventually killed Ciardha.

“We brought it to her in the hopes she might know the dialect,” Rhyden said. “Which she did—all too well. She told us it had belonged to Ciardha, that it had been a journal of sorts, a record of all of her dark magic and spells. Her book of shadows.”

Trejaeran said nothing. He blinked at Rhyden, his expression suddenly and curiously stoic.

“Orlaith was able to read the book,” Rhyden said. “She would not tell us much of what it contained, but she did say it revealed the source of some of Ciardha’s power...at

least that she had commanded over water. She had a talisman of some sort, the Shadow Stone. It is an ancient legend, nearly as old as the Na'Siogai, and I had never heard of it until this. The Shadow Stone commands the same four natural elements the Good Mother used to create the Bith—earth, wind, fire and water. Only the Stone will bestow its bearers with the power to use these forces to destroy the Bith. Orlaith believes this is the true source of the Shadow, that this talisman is the manifestation of whatever evil seized and consumed Ciardha. Ciardha hid the Stone—like her book of shadows, she buried it deep beneath the Midland Mountains, and Orlaith said the key to finding it was encoded in the book's pages.”

He leaned forward slightly. “They are sister talismans now, the book and the Stone. The same dark magic embodies them both. The spells in the book cannot be summoned without the Shadow Stone, and the Stone cannot be wielded without the book to unlock its secrets.”

Trejaeran stood from his seat and walked slowly away from the table. “Lahnduren,” he murmured, startling Rhyden. “He knows about the book. Ciardha would have told him about it, shared her knowledge of it—and how to read it—with him through the duchar. He will know about the Shadow Stone, too. He will try to claim them both, use them to overtake the throne.” He turned to Rhyden. “That is why you are here,” he said. “Why you have come, is it not, Rhyden?”

“How...how do you know that, bidein?” Rhyden asked, utterly flabbergasted. There was no way rumor could have preceded him to Edenvale, not even through the former Comhar council members. His mission had been one of strictest secrecy, one known only to Rhyden and the two kings he served—Neisrod of Tirurnua and Kierken of Tiralainn.

Trejaeran smiled grimly. “Because I know what Lahnduren knows,” he said. “Because he is like me, and he has survived the touch of the Shadow.”



“I have had strange dreams of late,” Trejaeran murmured, standing with his back to Rhyden a few moments later. “Dark dreams filled with shadows, images I did not

understand, a coldness that seeped into my bones and held me fast. Poppa has suffered them, too. Now at least, I know why. It is not madness at all, but awareness of the book. We sensed its discovery somehow, just as Lahnduren did.”

“He is putting together an army,” Rhyden said, rising from his chair. Trejaeran turned to him, stricken, and Rhyden nodded. “North of here, in the Dithreabh. Word has reached Belgaeran that Lahnduren has called upon every mercenary within the realm to his service—and promised them each a king’s ransom if he succeeds.”

“He will go after the book,” Trejaeran said. “Before he makes any move against Kierken, he will lay his hands on Ciardha’s book of shadows first. And with it, he will find the Shadow Stone.”

“He will not claim the book,” Rhyden said. “No one knows it is with Orlaith, that she is keeping it for us, translating it so we can find the Stone first and destroy them both.”

Trejaeran’s eyes widened. “Orlaith still has the book?” he asked, and Rhyden had no accounting for the sudden, ashen horror on his face. “Mother Above, Rhyden, she is in terrible danger, then. I...I have to go to her...!”

He started for the door, as if he meant to rush right out into the rain and head north toward the Dithreabh. Rhyden hurried after him, catching him by the arm as he lay his hand on the doorknob.

“Listen to me, bidein,” he said. “Orlaith is safe. Lahnduren thinks the book is in Iarnrod, the underground city. He has tried twice now to take it that we know of. We know he has hired traitors among the Abhacans to serve him, and King Neisrod has deliberately planted false clues and misinformation to divert their efforts.”

“She is not safe,” Trejaeran replied, jerking his arm forcefully loose of Rhyden’s grasp. “Do you not understand? Lahnduren does not need rumors to find the book of shadows—he can *sense* it, Rhyden, just as I can!”

“Even so, he cannot claim it, not from Orlaith,” Rhyden said. “She is immortal, Trejaeran.”

“Nothing is immortal, Rhyden,” Trejaeran said, his brows narrowing. “Orlaith can be killed the same way that her sister, Ciardha was—with the blade of the anam’cladh.

Lahnduren knows *this*, too—and he knows where the anam’cladh is. He knows that Qynh has it in Belgaeran.”

Rhyden thought of his dream, of stealing the anam’cladh. He blinked in momentary surprise, then shook his head. *It was only a dream*, he thought. *No more and no less. It does not mean anything.*

“Orlaith is trapped at Naofa’Ionad, her place of penance,” Trejaeran said. “She cannot escape. She cannot leave. Every moment she is alone there with the book, she is in danger.” He opened the door and marched outside. “I must go to her.”

Rhyden hurried after him. The rain had subsided to a thick, soggy mist that hung like a curtain in the air, enveloping them in sudden humidity. “Trejaeran, wait!” he cried. “Kierken and Qynh have called the Comhar together again—that is why I have come here! They want to convene in Belgaeran, to come up with a course of action—all of the allies together. They—”

“There is not time for that,” Trejaeran replied without turning around. He strode briskly into the barn. Rhyden stood in the doorway and watched in stupefied surprise as Trejaeran led a skinny, tired looking nag out from one of the stalls.

“You...you are just going to ride north?” Rhyden asked. “Right now, this moment?” *No cloak, no water, no food or weapon. He is mad!*

“Take my father to the manor at Orinein,” Trejaeran said, cinching the saddle strap tightly around the nag’s midriff, making it snuffle in unhappy protest. “Ask Iasal and Airrenigh to keep him there until I can come for him. He will not be safe here alone.”

“Bidein...” Rhyden began, reaching for him. Trejaeran turned, his brows narrowed as he moved to shove Rhyden aside, and Rhyden frowned, grasping Trejaeran firmly by the wrist. “Damn it, you cannot—”

Trejaeran shoved him hard, forcing him back a stumbling step, and Rhyden’s frown deepened. He pushed Trejaeran in return, planting his hand against Trejaeran’s shoulder and knocking him backward. They began to tussle, both of them locking arms and scuffling, shoving back and forth, until Rhyden at last forced his elbow beneath Trejaeran’s chin and pushed him back, pinning him against the stall gate.

“Stop it, Trejaeran,” he warned, his brows furrowed, his heart pounding, his body flooded with anxious adrenaline. He and Trejaeran had never fought; never in all of the years they had known one another had anything come to blows between them.

Trejaeran frowned, and then the same invisible force that had struck Rhyden earlier out in the barnyard plowed into him again, knocking him away from Trejaeran and sending him skittering across the barn. It hit with nowhere near the force Trejaeran had turned against him earlier, but when Rhyden slammed against the far wall, it still momentarily knocked the breath from him and rattled his skull. He stumbled forward, dropping to his knees, shaking his head against little pinpoints of light dancing in front of his eyes.

“Just stay out of my way, Rhyden,” Trejaeran told him.

Rhyden blinked at him, his vision clearing, his eyes round and wounded. Trejaeran stood before him, squared off, fists bared, his eyes blazing with a furious intensity Rhyden had never witnessed before. “What...what are you going to use first to stop me, bidein?” he asked breathlessly, hoarsely. “Your fists or the sight?”

Trejaeran’s severe expression faltered, softening toward shame, but just as his hands began to unfurl, his rigid posture relaxing, his gaze darted toward the barn doorway, his brows furrowing again, his tension restoring anew. “Poppa...!” he gasped.

He ran, bolting from the barn, leaving Rhyden on his knees, bewildered and alarmed. Rhyden limped to his feet and took off after his friend.

“Poppa!” Trejaeran shouted as he burst through the kitchen doorway and darted for the adjacent hallway. “Poppa! Stop!”

“What is it?” Rhyden cried, following. “Trejaeran—rot it all, will you stop?”

Trejaeran tugged fervently against the handle to Petrich’s door. He turned to Rhyden, wide-eyed and stricken. “It is locked!” He drove his fist against the door. “Poppa! Damn it, open the door!”

“Move,” Rhyden said, pushing Trejaeran aside. He rammed his shoulder against the door with all of his might. He did not know what was wrong, what had caused such abrupt and inexplicable panic in Trejaeran, but he figured there would be time aplenty for explanations later. Trejaeran’s gift of the sight was extremely powerful, and through it, he

had sensed his father in some sort of danger. Petrich had obviously lost his mind, and Rhyden suspected Trejaeran had every right and reason in the Bith to be worried.

He lunged forward, crashing into the door again, listening to the wood tax and creak with the force of the blow. He stepped back to try again, but Trejaeran caught him by the arm. “I have it,” he said, cutting his eyes toward the door. With a splintering crack, the door crashed inward, flying loose of its frame and plowing across the threshold into the room beyond.

“Oh...Sweet Mother...!” Rhyden gasped, his eyes flying wide with horror when he looked inside.

Petrich dangled from the end of a makeshift noose, a short length of rope wrapped around one of the exposed roof beams. It was all of the grim leverage he had needed; his face had already darkened from lack of oxygen, and his hands dangled limply at his sides, his body motionless in the air.

Rhyden rushed forward. He threw his arms around Petrich’s waist and struggled to lift him, to allow even a modicum of slack in the rope to prevent his strangulation. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Trejaeran still in the doorway, drawn to an uncertain and horrified halt.

“Help me!” Rhyden cried. “Take my sword from my belt—cut him down! Hurry!”

Rhyden struggled to support Petrich’s weight as Trejaeran climbed up onto a chair, claspng Rhyden’s sword between his hands and sawing at the thick hank of rope. Rhyden grunted, staggering as Petrich’s limp, lifeless bulk abruptly dropped in full measure against him when the rope snapped loose, and he knelt clumsily, lowering Trejaeran’s father to the floor.

“Poppa...!” Trejaeran gasped, falling to his knees. His eyes were enormous with shock, his hands fluttering helplessly around Petrich’s swollen, discolored face.

“His neck did not break,” Rhyden said, leaning over Petrich, fighting to slip his fingertips beneath the noose. He jerked at it, loosening it, struggling to yank it free. “He choked himself, but he can reclaim his breath yet.”

He flipped his hair back over his shoulder and leaned over all the more, bringing his ear—his sharply astute Elfin hearing—against Petrich’s mouth. He listened and felt

for the brush of air, but there was none. He pivoted, remaining on his knees, slipping one hand beneath Petrich's chin, tilting his head back slightly. "Get back, bidein," he said, without sparing Trejaeran a glance. He pinched Petrich's nose and pressed his mouth firmly against the older Elf's, huffing a long, full breath deeply into Petrich's lungs.

Rhyden's mother was a healer, one of an ancient Elfin medicinal sect known as the Banaltra. He had spent a lifetime watching and learning from her, and he had seen her once restore life and breath to lungs long-since drawn still in just such a fashion. Again and again, he pushed air into Petrich's lungs, sharing his own life and measure with his friend's father. Even though Petrich's chest moved, rising and falling, filling and emptying with each of Rhyden's proffered breaths, he made no effort on his own, and at last, when Rhyden's fumbling fingertips along the side of his neck could detect not even the most feeble and faint of pulsepoints, he cried out hoarsely in dismay.

"No, damn it!" He balled his hand into a fist and delivered it sharply, swiftly against Petrich's sternum, as if he hoped to pummel his heart back to life. "Petrich, wake up! Wake up, damn it!"

Again and again, he struck Petrich's chest, but it did no good. Finally, he looked at Trejaeran, stricken and anguished. "Bidein," he whispered. "Oh...oh, Trejaeran..."

Trejaeran blinked down at his father's body, his eyes enormous and stunned. He shook all over, shuddering with shock and grief.

"Trejaeran, I...I tried," Rhyden pleaded helplessly. "I...please, I am sorry..."



Rhyden and Trejaeran worked together, digging a deep pit in the sodden ground in which to bury Petrich Muirel. They fashioned the grave beneath a grove of pine trees near the back of the barn. Trejaeran's mother, Naera, had been buried here, and they dug Petrich's final resting place next to that of his beloved wife.

The rain had returned, and both young men were drenched. They worked for the better part of several hours, until they had cleared a hole long enough and deep enough for them both to stand abreast in, shovels in hand, wading through a growing pool of knee-deep water running down from above. They clambered out, both of them slipping and sliding for uncertain purchase and muddy handholds. They had wrapped Petrich in linen sheets that were now nearly blackened with dirt and rain. Together, with Trejaeran at his father's feet, and Rhyden hoisting him beneath the shoulders, they were able to lower him with some semblance of dignity into the sodden and makeshift grave. They covered him, shoving piles of mud heavily down upon the corpse, filling the pit.

When they were finished, they began to heft large, flat creek stones from behind the barn and made a rudimentary cairn over the grave mound. Trejaeran moved like a man possessed, his brows furrowed, his soaked hair clinging to his face, his palor ghastly and pale. He worked as if his grief and pain enraged him, and allowed himself no respite with tears.

They were both soaking wet and covered with mud when they returned to the house, and Rhyden led Trejaeran straight through the kitchen, heading for his bedroom.

"He must of heard us," Trejaeran said quietly, his voice dull and flat, devoid of any hint of emotion. "When we were talking in the kitchen earlier, he must have overheard and despaired. To know the Shadow still had influence over him...that it was stirring again..."

"Change your clothes, bidein," Rhyden said quietly, easing Trejaeran gently across his threshold. "Put something dry on. I will put us on some tea."

“He was not mad after all,” Trejaeran murmured, standing with his back to Rhyden, making no move to undress. “He...Mother Above, he was the sanest of us all.”

Rhyden did not answer. He did not know what to say. He was exhausted and still reeling with shock. He put a kettle above the coal bank to simmer, then took a lantern in hand and went back outside. He went to a small patch of overgrown thickets near the barn where at one time, if his memory had served, the Muirels had kept an herb patch. Although it was clearly long-since abandoned, Rhyden hoped to find some varieties still growing wild. He set the lantern on the ground and squatted, shoving and sorting through the tangled weeds and brambles. He did not find much, but the meager samples he did find were better than naught, he figured. He picked them carefully and carried them back into the house. He could not find anything suitable or clean in the mess of Trejaeran’s kitchen, and settled for pressing the damp leaves beneath the pommel of his dagger until he had a thin, sloppy paste.

“Here,” he said to Trejaeran, when his friend returned to sit by the fire, wearing a threadbare but dry leine and breeches. He presented Trejaeran with a spoonful of the minced herbs. “Eat it,” he said with a nod. “It will taste bitter. Wash it down with the tea. It will help you sleep.”

Trejaeran offered neither question nor protest, lifting the spoon listlessly in hand and downing the herbal paste in one mouthful. He did not grimace, or move to wash the flavor from his mouth with the sweeter, honey-infused tea Rhyden offered.

He blinked dazedly, staring at nothing in particular, his hair hanging about his face in wet tendrils, his eyes glassy and haunted. Rhyden fished a clean shirt and pants from his traveling bag and stripped off his soaked leine.

“I asked Emylein Braedy to marry me,” Trejaeran said, his voice low and distant.

Rhyden blinked, holding his clean shirt between his hands. “What?”

Trejaeran glanced at him. “Emylein Braedy. You remember her, do you not? When we were kids, my sixteenth birthday, she gave me a kiss.”

“I remember, yes,” Rhyden said, nodding. He did not understand what had prompted this course of conversation, but said nothing to dissuade it. Trejaeran was in shock, his face ashen, his hands trembling as he toyed with his tea cup.

“When we returned after the war, Poppa and me, after Qynh was named Queen, and Kierken her King, I went to see her father, Liam, all goodly and proper and ask for her hand,” Trejaeran said. “I thought I could come back here...that *we* could come back here, me and Poppa, and pick up our lives just as we had left them. That somehow everything would be the same...that we would be the same.”

The corner of his mouth hooked thinly. “I thought that was what I wanted,” he said. “Before we left, I had wanted to marry Emy. I thought I loved her. And so I asked for her father’s permission.”

He looked at Rhyden, his blue eyes round and mournful. “He told me no. He said he would not trust his daughter to the magic of the Elves. He said I had brought something back with me from the war, the taint of the Shadow was upon me. He forbade me to ever see Emy again.”

Rhyden sat down across from him, still bare-chested, holding his shirt in his hands. “He was wrong to say that, bidein.”

Trejaeran looked down at the table. “Was he?” he whispered.

Rhyden reached for Trejaeran’s hand, hooking his fingers against his friend’s palm and drawing his gaze. “Yes, Trejaeran,” he said. “He was.”

Trejaeran looked at him, his expression unreadable, his eyes hardened and cool like creek stones. “You have been away, Rhyden,” he said. “A lot of time has passed and things have changed. You do not know me anymore.”

“Do not say that,” Rhyden said.

“The Shadow is stirring, Rhyden,” Trejaeran said. “Poppa could feel it. I can, too. It broke his mind.”

“But it will not break yours,” Rhyden told him. “We will defeat it. As we did before, let us do it again, Trejaeran. Come with me to Belgaeran. Stand in the shelter of your friends and allies—the people who love you. The people who would die for you.”

Trejaeran studied him, nothing in his face shifting or softening. “Would you, Rhyden?” he whispered. “Would you die for me?”

Rhyden nodded. “Yes, bidein,” he said. He rose to his feet and reached for his hip, drawing his father’s sword from its sheath. He grasped the hilt in both hands and drove the tip of the blade mightily downward, punching into the floor between Trejaeran’s feet.

He knelt, looking up past the cruciform of the hilt toward his friend. “By my father’s sword, Trejaeran—this blade that my family has called its own for more than seven hundred years, that has seen my ancestors fight and die for noble causes, and that holds any and all honor I have or will ever possess as my own—I swear to you by that honor, Trejaeran, and by this blade, that I would die for you.”

Trejaeran met his gaze and Rhyden held it fast. *I will not let the Shadow take you, bidein*, Rhyden thought. *It must pass me first to lay any claim.*

At last, that hard glint in Trejaeran’s unflinching gaze softened, and he smiled gently, as if he had been privy to these thoughts. “You are so full of scat, Rhyden Fabhcun,” he said, and then he laughed. “And I...hoah, Mother Above, I am so grateful for you.”

His laughter choked off abruptly with tears, and when he covered his face with his hands, weeping at last, his grief escaping him, Rhyden drew him against his shoulder, holding him fiercely.



Once Trejaeran had succumbed to the herbal mixture and fallen deeply asleep, Rhyden finished redressing. He drew his soggy cloak around his shoulders and ducked outside into the yard beyond the kitchen once more. He whistled for his horse, and after a few moments, Dherga approached, plodding around the side of the house, the stallion’s pale coat nearly luminescent in diffused moonlight seeping through clouds.

“I...I am sorry...” Trejaeran had mumbled as sleep had overtaken him. He had reached for Rhyden’s hand, hooking his fingers against his own. “For the barn...fighting with you. I...I did not mean it...”

“I know, bidein,” Rhyden had told him gently. “I am sorry, too.”

“I still have to leave tomorrow,” Trejaeran had murmured. “I know you want me to go to Belgaeran but I...I cannot leave Orlaith alone...”

Rhyden glanced over his shoulder once toward the house, and then swung himself up into his saddle. He reined Dherga to the left, digging his heels into the horse’s belly and spurring it into motion. Nearly every portion of his childhood that he could

remember had been spent either on the Muirel family farm, or his own, and he felt confident that even in its state of overgrowth, and in the dark, after so many years away, he could find his way to the farmhouse he had once called his home. Dagarron Atreile was there, his ally and friend—and more importantly, Trejaeran’s ally and friend.

Rhyden did not expect to be able to dissuade Trejaeran all on his own, but he hoped that with Dagarron’s help, they might be able to appeal to Trejaeran’s reason. Trejaeran was vulnerable now, nearly crippled with grief, and Dagarron had always been very much a father-figure in his esteem. Rhyden hoped that influence might persuade Trejaeran to join the Comhar again.

“You will be safe there, bidein,” Rhyden whispered, as Dherga loped across the remains of what had once been a bountiful barley field. He rode for the better part of a mile, his torso folded over the stallion’s withers, the reins held tightly in his hands. The wind on his face was cool and moist; it tugged against his long, heavy hair, flapping it behind him, tangling in the folds of his cloak.

All at once, he reined Dherga to a halt. The large stallion skittered, its back haunches nearly folding as its hooves scrambled for unexpected purchase in the wet, muddy soil. When the horse was still, there was nothing but silence, broken by Dherga’s snorting huffs for breath, the faint grinding of the horse’s teeth against the iron plate of its bit.

Rhyden looked all around, his hand falling reflexively against the pommel of his sword. He strained his acutely sensitive ears, listening, and panned his gaze in a broad, sweeping arc, peering into the darkness.

He thought he heard distant hoof-beats, a swift and furious measure, behind him somewhere and moving northward, but in the darkness, he could see nothing.

He had the strangest sensation, the likes of which he had never experienced, a creeping chill sliding down the nape of his neck. *Like something is wrong*, he thought. *Terribly, horribly wrong.*

He caught a faint whiff of fragrance alight in the air, and frowned, glancing over his shoulder. Along the dark horizon behind him, in the direction of the Muirel farmhouse, he saw a faint, fluttering glow. The wind shifted, coming in from the east,

pressing against his face, and he could smell it again—a pungent, earthen scent. *Smoke*, he thought, and again, that chill shivered through him. *That smells like wood smoke.*

He opened his mind, extending his modicum of the sight, straining his senses as much as he was able, and jerked in the saddle as he felt them, at least two dozen people, their presences within his mind jumbled together in a mess of heated emotions and murderous rage. He could not discern who they were, only their shared and venomous fury, but he realized what they were—and what they were doing—and his heart seized in sudden, terrified dismay.

The villagers of Edenvale! he thought, wrenching against Dherga's reins, jerking the horse about in a tight, swift circle. *Mother Above, they are setting fire to the farm house! They mean to burn Trejaeran alive!*



Rhyden raced the stallion fast and hard, and as he drew closer to the house, he could see the enormous blaze that had fully engulfed it. It was dazzling and bright, staining the leading edge of the horizon in shades of scarlet and yellow, sending up thick, billowing clouds of smoke.

“Trejaeran!” Rhyden screamed, jerking his sword from its scabbard. He could see the villagers gathered around the blaze, a massive throng of overlapping silhouettes bearing torches, pitchforks, spears and scythes. He could smell the stink of lantern fuel even through the smoke, and knew they must have brought with them every gallon and pint upon which they could lay hands. Seized with bright terror and fury, Rhyden spurred Dherga forward, charging into the crowd, sending them shrieking and scattering into the night.

“Trejaeran!” he cried again, swinging his leg around and leaping from the saddle with the horse still in motion. He landed on his feet, stumbling slightly before reclaiming his balance, and then darted for the house. When two of the village men cut into his path, swords brandished, the cowls of their cloaks pulled low along their brows in an attempt to hide their faces, Rhyden drove them back with his own blade, swinging wildly, battering aside their feeble attempts to parry.

“Murderers!” he screamed. “You rot damn murderers! What have you done?”

He scrambled onto the front porch, hunching his shoulders as a rain of fiery cinders spilled down from the roof at him. His cloak was still damp from the earlier rainfall, and he snapped the hood up over his head to protect his face and hair. The smoke was so thick, he could not breathe for his proximity to the blaze; he hiccupped for shallow breath through his mouth, squinting as his eyes flooded reflexively with tears. The entire house was enveloped in flames, the ruined thatch of the roof furiously alight. The front door was barred from within, but Rhyden launched himself at it, battering into it with his shoulder over and over until the old, rotten wood yielding, cracking inward, collapsing off its hinges.

A sudden, searing blast of heat slammed through the open doorway into Rhyden, driving him back, and he ducked his face, feeling his eyelashes and brows singe. He risked a peek and saw the living room beyond the threshold was filled with fire. *Oh, Mother Above, Trejaeran has burned, surely!* he thought, and he cried out hoarsely, choked with despair.

“Trejaeran!” Rhyden raised his arm protectively toward his face and sheathed his father’s sword. He rushed forward into the house, ducking and dancing as portions of the roof and burning lengths of ceiling rafters came crashing down at him.

He tried to scream Trejaeran’s name again, but choked on the heavy smoke. He clapped his hand over his mouth, drawing the corner of his wet cloak to the lower quadrant of his face and struggled not to gag. He could not see anything; the smoke was dense, and the heat too severe, and Rhyden moved blindly, solely on memory, cutting to his left and making his way along the narrow corridor toward Trejaeran’s room.

The door was open, the room ablaze, and Rhyden managed a choked, horrified cry to see Trejaeran’s bed, the straw-filled mattress engulfed in flames. “No! Mathair Maith, no!”

He ran toward the bed, but there was nothing he could do. The flames were too intense, the heat too severe. He could not even see a hint of his friend’s form through the fire. He snatched at the corners of his cloak, wrapping his hands hurriedly in the damp folds and then smacked at the burning mattress, groping through the flames, desperate to

reach his friend. The fire seared his palms through the cloth, and he jerked reflexively back, crying out in frightened pain.

The bed...! It is empty! he thought in surprise and dismay. He looked all around him, at the burning room. “Trejaeran!” he screamed hoarsely. “Trejaeran, ca bhfuil tu?” *Where are you?*

He waded through the smoke and fire, leaving the bedroom and crossing the corridor. Petrich’s threshold was filled with flames, and Rhyden hunched his shoulders, ducking his head as he stumbled across. The dry straw of Petrich’s mattress had also quickly ignited, as cinders had dropped from the burning thatch roof, and now was fully ablaze. The severed strap of rope remaining from the noose that had killed him, still fettered to an overhead cross beam, was also ablaze. Rhyden could hear the ceiling groaning now above him, ominous and insistent, ready to collapse at any moment. He peered blearily through the flames and smoke, but saw nothing in the room, no sign of Trejaeran.

“Trejaeran, ca bhfuil tu?” he screamed. *Where are you?* He staggered from the bedroom, whooping on smoke, tears streaming down his cheeks. He could not breathe; the wind felt choked from his lungs. He returned to the living room, looking wildly about, and then stumbled for the adjacent kitchen.

He heard a low, foreboding creak from overhead, and then a tremendous crash from somewhere behind him, one of the bedrooms, as a huge portion of the ceiling and roof crashed inward. *Mother Above, the rest is surely not far behind!* he thought desperately, even as the joists and beams above him began to shudder, the taxed wood moaning, sending a searing rainfall of burning cinders showering down at him.

The kitchen was empty, the ceiling about to collapse, but Rhyden hesitated in the middle of the room, his shoulders hunkered, his eyes burning, his gut tightening to gag as he filled his lungs with thick, acrid smoke. “Trejaeran!” he cried, and then he began to wretch, doubled over, his gullet heaving from the smoke.

He floundered blindly across the kitchen and pawed at the door handle. The metal was hot, the iron heated to branding ferocity from the blaze, and Rhyden wrenched his hand back as again, his flesh seared. He doubled the flap of his cloak around his palm and grabbed again, just as he heard a loud cracking from above him, the sounds of roof beams

strained beyond endurance. He threw the door open and leaped outside, diving away from the house head-first as another thunderous series of crashes shuddered air and earth around him. The entire farmhouse roof collapsed, smashing down atop the blazing foundation, sending out a tremendous cloud of smoke and grit.

Rhyden landed hard against the yard, slamming down on his chest and rapping his chin hard enough to bite clear through his tongue, flooding his mouth with blood. He lay there, trembling, reeling, choking feebly for breath. After a long moment, despite himself, the pain in his hands, the taste of blood and vomit in his mouth, he began to laugh. It was a dry, hoarse sound, more a fluttering of air than anything lent true voice, but he shook with the force of it, his eyes closed, his cheek pressed against the mud and trampled grass.

Trejaeran, he thought, laughing. *You son of a bitch.*

He thought of the hoof-beats he had heard when he had first drawn Dherga to a halt in the field, the sound of someone traveling fast and by horseback.

Traveling north, Rhyden thought. *You son of a bitch—traveling north to the Naofa'lonad—and Orlaith. What, did you read my mind? Did the sight reveal my plan to you?*

He choked, feeling bile rise against the back of his throat again. He spit out a thick, ropy mouthful and laughed again. *You were never in the house at all when they set it alight. You...bugger me, you tricked us all.*

He felt something cool and hard press against the side of his face, the edge of a sword blade. His laughter died abruptly in his throat, and his eyes flew wide. He shifted his weight instinctively, reaching beneath his belly for his hip, his own hilt.

“I do not know who you are, boy,” he heard a man say, and there was a soft squish as boots settled heavily against the mud near Rhyden’s head. “But anyone who helps a witch is just as guilty of their treachery.”

Rhyden rolled, whipping his arm around and knocking aside the blade at his face. In the same swift movement, he wrenched his father’s sword free from his belt, and he thrust it forward, leveling the silver point squarely at the man’s head, the measure of shadow-draped space beneath the hood of his dark cloak.

“My name is Rhyden Fabhcun,” Rhyden said, his brows furrowed. He canted his face and spit blood, keeping his sword aimed directly—and with menacing intent—at the man. “I am the King’s royal ambassador, here in Nichten County in official capacity. The King knows where I am, as does your Baronmaster. If anything should happen to me, I promise those cloaks will not keep you secreted and the lot of you will hang.”

The “lot” of them to Rhyden’s swift, darting gaze seemed to now consist solely of this man, tall and strapping, his face hidden in darkness, and another beside him, a willowy figure dressed in the unmistakable red cassock and cloak of a clergymen. All of the other villagers had fled, it would seem, frightened either by Dherga’s stalwart storming of their ranks, or Rhyden’s crazed recklessness as exhibited by his charge into the burning house.

Keeping his sword leveled, Rhyden scooted back in the grass, limping to his feet. “Who are you?” he asked. He backed away, broadening the circumference of space between him and the two men, his eyes darting warily back and forth.

The man with the sword said nothing. After a long moment in which Rhyden could feel his gaze piercing forth from beneath the shadows of his hood, boring into Rhyden, he lowered his blade. He motioned to his companion, and then the two of them turned, walking around the side of the house toward the front yard.

“Who are you?” Rhyden shouted again, moving to follow them. Neither had seemed familiar to him; they had the voices of strangers, and Rhyden had never known of any priests or pastors in the area, at least not while he was growing up. His effort to cry out caused him to choke again, his throat strained and scraped raw with smoke. He doubled over, gagging, and his knees failed him. His sword dropped to the grass, and he fell. By the time he reclaimed his breath, footing and blade, and then stumbled around the side of the house in pursuit, the two men—like all of their companions—were gone, vanished into the night.



He did not remember climbing astride Dherga or riding the long, dark distance from the Muirel farm to Dagarron Atreile's house. He had vague memory of leaning, slumped against the stallion's withers, his hands tucked against his belly, and relying solely on the horse's instincts to deliver him. He had been unable to hold the reins; his hands were blistered and burned, throbbing with a deep, hot, piercing pain that left him semi-lucid and dazed, lapsing in and out of consciousness.

When he came to, he found himself in his boyhood bedroom, tucked in a soft bed beneath clean, sweet-smelling quilts. For a long, bewildering moment, he was utterly disoriented, the previous night—the last five years of his life, in fact—slapped from his mind, and he was convinced that he was no more than sixteen years old, little more than a child once more. *Any moment now, Mum will call to me from the kitchen, he thought. It is early spring...harrowing season...and Father will need me to help him in the barley fields...*

He groaned softly, drawing his hand toward his face. He blinked in sleepy surprise to discover his palm and fingers hidden beneath a mitten of clean bandages; someone with a deft hand and a familiarity with triage had tended to his burns.

He pushed the blankets aside and sat up. Someone had stripped him of his wet, filthy clothes, redressing him in only a pair of clean underbreeches. He looked around, groggy and aching, and his proper place in the scheme of things—the *time* of things—returned to him. This had been his room once, but it clearly was no longer. The furnishings and décor, functional and decidedly feminine were not the ones he had used as a boy. This was a woman's sanctuary now—a sewing room, from the looks of the quilt frame, spinning wheel and baskets of yarn spread about on the floor.

He stumbled to his feet and limped out of the room, following a corridor toward the kitchen. He heard muffled voices to guide him, and found Dagarron Atreile sitting at a wooden table, a cup of tea between his hands and a grim expression knotting his brows

and twisting his mouth. Dagarron's wife, Wyndetta, stood at a nearby iron stove, stirring at a skillet of eggs with a wooden spatula. She smiled when she saw Rhyden in the doorway, and her eyes cut momentarily, if not somewhat appreciatively, down the length of his frame, reminding him sheepishly of his state of relative undress.

"Good morning, a'leaid," Dagarron said, calling him *lad*. He rose from the table and walked toward Rhyden, his face softening with a smile. He hooked his hand against the back of Rhyden's head and drew him near in a brief but fond embrace. "Cen chaol a bhfuil tu?" *How are you?*

"I am better, sir, go raimh maith agat," Rhyden said. *Thank you*. He met Dagarron's gaze, his brows lifting slightly. "Petrich Muirel is dead. He hung himself yesterday afternoon."

Wyndetta gasped audibly and there was no disguising or mistaking the visible, visceral pain that immediately clouded Dagarron's face. "Mother Above," he whispered, forking his fingers through his hair.

"Villagers came last night to the farm shortly after we buried him," Rhyden said. "They set the house afire."

Dagarron nodded. "I rode out there last night after you arrived. I saw what was left." He looked stricken. "I did not think it would come to anything like this. I did not think they were capable." He looked at Rhyden, pleading. "Where is Trejaeran? Is...is he...?" His voice cracked and faded.

"He escaped," Rhyden replied, and relief, abject and apparent, shuddered through Dagarron. "He fled for the north, the Naofa'Ionad. He has gone to protect Orlaith."

"Orlaith?" Wyndetta asked.

Rhyden nodded. "The Shadow is stirring again," he said. "I need you to come with me—the both of you. The Council of the Comhar is to meet again." He thought of his dream in which he had envisioned the theft of the anam'cladh, the only weapon in the Bith capable of killing Orlaith. Orlaith had the book of shadows—the sole guide to finding the Shadow Stone, the most powerful, evil talisman imaginable. Lahnduren was after the Stone, and its power, and he would stop at nothing to claim it.

Rhyden locked gazes grimly with Dagarron. “We have to leave today for Belgaeran, as soon as possible—now, if you can manage,” he said. “We have no time for delay. The fate of everything hangs in the balance.”

☒ *End* ☒

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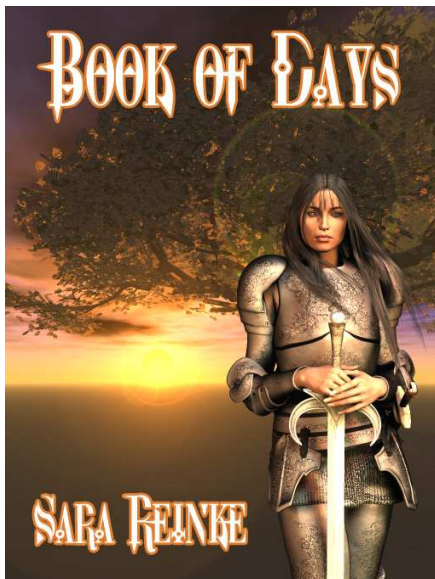
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