

An excerpt from

SHADOWLESS

BOOK I OF THE ILMAEN QUARTET

HELEN BELL

SHADOWLESS

This update published July 2020

Extract first published May 2015

by

Light-Carillon Publishing

Copyright ©Helen Bell 2015

All rights reserved

Helen Bell has asserted her right to be identified as

the author of this work in accordance with the

Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988

SHADOWLESS

Think how it would be, if you could see the future...

Now think again.

Renia knows trouble is coming when she and her brother Vel pull a stranger from the surf, more dead than alive.

Vel sees adventure ahead; but they have rescued a driven man who won't abandon his duty whatever it costs. They face a powerful enemy willing to plunge a whole nation into chaos to gain revenge.

Renia knows things won't end well because she is a far-seer.

And there's nothing she can do to change what's ahead.

SHADOWLESS

Praise for SHADOWLESS

‘I was pulled in right away. There’s so much energy in the story. It really comes alive.’

Al Stone, author of Talisman of El

‘Has an epic feel to it with richly painted characters and settings.’

M.L. Hamilton, World of Samar Series

‘A mix of Celia Rees and Mary Webb.’

Jane Alexander, Walker

‘The characters build, you get to know them and it suddenly occurs to you that you've been caught up in their world longer than you had planned...’

Amazon.co.uk Customer review

SHADOWLESS

Chapter 1 – The Vision

The sound of gulls squabbling woke Renia. She lay and listened, picturing the ill-tempered dispute outside, recognizing some of the more distinctive cries. Whatever it was they were squabbling over, it sounded like Notch-wing was winning. No change there, then.

She yawned and fidgeted till the covers settled closer round her, savouring the warmth. Spring had arrived, but the mornings were still chilly. She could hear Melor was up and about, and judging by the light coming round the curtain that screened off her sleeping space, the shutters were back already. Breakfast was needed; and breakfast was her job. Reluctantly she reached out and pulled her clothes under the covers to warm them up a bit.

‘Morning, Melor,’ she called.

‘Morning, *cariad*.’

‘What’s it like out?’

‘Cold, but bright. Vel thinks it’ll turn into a nice day. He’s lit the range and gone already. Did you get that? The range is lit, the kettle’s on the hob. Does that make getting up any easier?’

‘Yes, all right, I’m coming.’ She smiled, thankful he made his point by teasing. Most farm children in the district would have got a clout if they weren’t up with the dawn. That had never been Melor’s way, he had never once lifted a hand either to her or to Vel. A confirmed bachelor until he adopted them, he’d always pleaded ignorance of the accepted wisdoms of raising children and had just worked it out as he went along. As his adopted daughter, she felt he’d done well; and by using a light hand he probably got more work out of them, not less.

SHADOWLESS

She dressed under the covers, turned the sheets back to air and headed out into the parlour to the welcoming heat of the range.

It looked like Vel had taken some cold cuts off the joint in the larder before he set out; he had left his dirty plate and knife beside the sink. Since Melor liked a hot breakfast (and today's chilly start justified it), she put a skillet on the range, cut a few more slices off the joint, and tossed them in the pan. As she pushed the slices round to stop them sticking, Melor came over to check on their progress, ruffled her tousled hair and headed out to the well with a bucket.

She and Vel had always known they were not Melor's own children. He'd adopted them when they were very young – in Renia's case, too young to remember. The early years must have been hard going, but he had promised their dying mother he would bring them up himself, and keep them off the Charity list. He could never quite explain why he had made such a promise; the woman had, after all, been a stranger to him. But then again, as he often reminded them both, he had never had reason to regret that promise.

A moment of madness, the rest of the village had thought it. Not that Melor cared: the village could think what it liked. He was somewhere between accepted and tolerated by them; they already considered him a little crazy, their godless clansman who lived alone in his strange cave-house up on the sea cliffs. Adopting a stranger's children was just another example of his oddness, though in their opinion a particularly ill-considered one. After all, the children would bear the brunt if it went wrong, as surely it must.

He'd proved them wrong though, settling into the sudden and unfamiliar role of fatherhood with much less trouble than everyone expected. Inevitably eyebrows were still raised and tongues were still wagged, when for instance he strapped baby Renia to a hurdle he hauled behind him whenever he worked outdoors. It had made her cross when she'd heard about the gossip, years later. The village seemed to forget that he'd had a farm to run: she was a toddler and, if he'd left her on the loose, it wouldn't have been long before she

SHADOWLESS

went straight over the cliff edge. Vel had been five, a self-reliant and sensible child, so he'd been no trouble. To hear Melor tell it they were both easy children – right up until she started having fits.

Melor padded back in, topped up the kitchen water barrel, and sniffed appreciatively: 'That's cooked enough for me, jewel. You serve up, I'll make tea.'

They ate and drank in silence, comfortable enough together not to have to fill the quiet with talk. He had his lambing list on the kitchen table this morning and looked through it as he sipped his tea, working out which fields he needed to check. She let her thoughts run on.

Renia had started to forget about the fits, it had been so long since she'd had one, but something had roused her during the night and though it might just have been a bad dream she couldn't quite remember, chances were it was a fit. She had been six when they started, and it had been common knowledge around the village; it wasn't something Melor had ever tried to keep secret. Sometimes it was just a minute or two of disconnection from the world, as if she was awake and daydreaming. She'd frequently talk to people during such fits, but a prod or a pinch couldn't wake her from it, not like normal sleep. Others were full-blown seizures, frightening to her and to those who didn't understand what was happening; she would fall down and go into convulsions. While the sight scared some people, mainly it roused pity in them. If as a child she had a falling fit in the village, folk would sit her up and smile at her when she woke, and tell her she'd 'seen the fairies again'. That had been her own description for the strange, sparkling haze she saw before a seizure. At six, she hadn't realized how her words were going to come back and haunt her later.

One day as they got ready to go to market she'd had a waking fit and told Melor in a dreamy voice about all the things that were going to happen in town, from the innkeeper returning some money he'd borrowed so long ago Melor had forgotten about it, through to

SHADOWLESS

Old Ifan the butcher dropping a side of mutton and tripping headlong over it. Melor had listened and smiled at her imagination and once she was fully restored from the fit they'd gone off to town. At the market she stayed with the other children, playing tag round the village carts or knucklebones underneath them; Melor went off to sell his meat and make small talk with the stallholders and shopkeepers.

When he came back he was a different man; unsmiling, unnerved. He'd been silent all the way home. That night he took Renia aside and explained to her that the returned money, the dropped meat – everything had happened exactly as she'd described. He didn't know how she had done it but she had seen the future... and no one else must ever hear of it, he'd warned her.

Then she'd understood the change in him. Six was old enough to know how it would be seen. The Catastrophe was long centuries past, but it still tormented the sleep of many and spilled over into waking memory. Not everyone had the dreams; but she did, and Vel, and many others, all the same dream.

There was a city on the horizon, unfathomably huge. It could be any one of hundreds all across the known world, but all were similar, as was their fate. The city towered over the landscape and burrowed as far beneath it, its citizens beyond numbering, invisible from that distance but imagined, like ants busy about their lives. Then the blinding light from the heart of the city, followed by the absolute dark of the nothingness that replaced it; and finally the implosion that sucked the air from the dreamer's lungs and woke them, gasping with relief, knowing they were safe in their own bed and not on the edge of oblivion. The belief that witchcraft had done this, wiped every city and its people from the face of the earth and nearly eradicated mankind, wasn't simply based on a story; the memory was innate in the descendants of those who had witnessed it.

SHADOWLESS

Renia had been frightened by what Melor said because *he* was frightened; she was scared that he was frightened of her. She'd never seen him so serious. She'd asked him outright then, 'Am I one of *them*?' and it was like his heart broke and then mended, right in front of her, and he hugged her for what felt like an age. It was the old Melor who'd looked her in the eye when he was done with hugging, the way he always looked at her when he was saying something important. 'No, Renia. You're not. You're not bad or evil. But what you can do – it *looks* like witchcraft, and that would be frightening to some. People make bad decisions when they're scared, even sensible people.'

So they had hidden it from everyone but Vel (who was too close and too smart to miss it), and for years Renia had bitten her tongue and let any events she foresaw unfold as they must.

By the age of eleven when she was apprenticed to the seamstress Ceri Ty'r Llyn in the village, Renia was less wary and more open-hearted. The passing of several untroubled years made her naïve enough to think she might use her power to do good. It seemed the right thing to do, telling Ceri when she future-saw her little girl Rhyanna becoming seriously ill, but no sooner had the child fallen into a raging fever than Ceri blurted out the warning she had been given, by the girl who saw fairies. From that moment the village was divided into two camps: those who believed Renia truly saw the future and were scared of her powers, and those who accused her of causing the events that she had 'predicted' by poisoning the child.

The little girl had recovered, but fears had been awakened, and they ran too deep to be ignored. Folk would catch sight of Renia and cast a glance east: that was where the Hampton Citywild lay, though no one from the village had ever been there. A forsaken crater miles across, they said, like a bite out of the south coast, where once there had been one of those unfathomably huge cities so many of them dreamt of – gone in the instant of the Catastrophe,

SHADOWLESS

along with all its citizens. The crater lay like a scar on the landscape, a constant reminder of the city's fate, and was not somewhere folk willingly set foot. After all, if you believed in witchcraft you'd like as not believe in ghosts; and if the stories were true, Hampton Citywild had fifty million of them.

So it was that a frightened eleven-year-old found herself called before the Hendynion, the village council of elders, to see if there was a case to answer. If there was, then eleven or not she would be tried; either for poisoning Rhyanna or, worse, for being a *gwrach* – a witch.

She remembered little of it now, five years later, except for certain faces which stayed sharp in her memory. Those of the seven old men who were to pass judgment on her, and Melor's, and Ceri's.

Most of the old men wore unreadable expressions. Two did not, and it was to those faces that Renia's eyes were drawn repeatedly throughout the hearing. One man's face spoke a simple message: loathing and distrust. Clearly he had not a shred of doubt that she was guilty. The other face took her a while to read, until the man smiled briefly at her. To her relief she realized he would have been amused by the whole ridiculous business, only he looked at her and saw a frightened child and was angry on her behalf.

Melor's face she recalled too. He was always at her side or in her sight, so she knew he was watching over her. Much was made in the Hendynion of her unknown parentage, the fact that she was Melor's adopted and not his true daughter, but no one would have thought them anything other than blood kin if they had not been told. He was with her unfailingly that day and it was only now, years later, that she realized how much she owed him for that.

But the face she recalled best was Ceri's. Her employer did not look Renia's way at all while she gave her statement to the Hendynion, but she spoke quietly and steadily, and her words were in support of Renia. Ceri told them how perceptive a child her apprentice was, and that she must have seen some sign of Rhyanna's

SHADOWLESS

fever coming that Ceri herself had missed, for she knew that Renia would never harm a child. She confessed now that her reaction to Renia's prediction had been a hasty judgement, born of fear for her child when she fell ill so suddenly. The signs had been there, Renia had seen them and Ceri had not; she had been thoughtless and wrong to say otherwise.

Ceri saved her that day, beyond question; there were others in the village who would have pursued the matter, but Ceri was the one who had started the outcry and with her retraction there was no case to answer. So the Hendynion pronounced, and Renia was free to go. Ceri had looked as relieved as Renia at the verdict, and filed out of the hall with everyone else.

Outside, Ceri's sister was waiting. Her son Dailo scowled at them from behind her and little Rhyanna squirmed in her arms, eager to get back to her mother. Ceri gathered up her daughter and turned just as Renia and Melor passed by. That was when she finally glanced at Renia.

There had been no signs of fever on the day Renia had warned her about Rhyanna's illness. The look said Ceri knew that; and whatever reason she'd had for helping Renia out of trouble, she still believed that when she warned her, Renia had seen into the future.

After that Renia had kept away from the village. It was the only way Vel and Melor could carry on anything resembling normal life. She lived like a recluse now, avoiding people where she could and rarely venturing far from Melor's house. She had abandoned training to be a seamstress, much to Ceri's relief; she was not a bad woman, but like much of the village Ceri believed in evil spirits and would never again be comfortable in Renia's presence, thinking her a *gwrach*. And while most who thought like Ceri wanted only to be left alone by Renia, there were others who felt she needed 'attending to'. The majority contented themselves with remarks and sly comments, but a few hinted they were prepared to go further.

SHADOWLESS

Eventually the remarks ended Vel's apprenticeship too; someone repeated them once too often at the blacksmith's, and the smith reluctantly decided that, talented though Vel was, an angry forge hand with a white-hot piece of metal and a hammer in his hands would not be good for business. Melor's response was to say nothing, increase the size of his flock of sheep and start a herd of goats. Vel was promptly taken on on full-time as his assistant.

There was more than enough work to be done on the farm so Renia threw herself into those jobs that Melor and Vel left her. She also studied herbs and healing; Melor bought her old books – she had learnt to read and write early, at his insistence – and she absorbed from them and experimented. More talk from the village over that, of course, but she was beyond caring, so long as they left her alone.

Melor came back early from the fields, bringing only two ewes ready to drop their lambs. Renia had done her tasks around the house by then, thinking he would need help; now she had some unexpected freedom. She decided to venture as far as the woods to collect herbs – mostly for cooking, but some for her medicinal experiments. The wood was a treasure trove; but it was also the main haunt of the older village boys in their free hours. Still, it was the middle of the day and she could take a route that would help her avoid them.

Much of what she wanted was to be found in the dappled shade, where the trees sloped down into a flat stretch near the stream, and that was where she headed. Wild ramsons covered the approach to the water, their pungent garlic smell calling to the hungry. She filled most of her basket with them; she also broke off a few strips of bark from the willows beside the stream and tucked those in too – a pain-relief staple for many healers, but one of her books contained a method of concentrating the tincture to make it more effective, and Renia wanted to try it out.

SHADOWLESS

The low, early-morning sunlight glanced off the stream as she waded through it, looking for early herbs in the ground beyond. She had taken several steps further when she noticed that sparkling lights still remained, dancing in the corners of her eyes. It was not the sunlight on the stream she was seeing but ‘the fairies’, the glittering that denoted the onset of a fit. She sat down quickly and waited nervously for it to arrive, remembering how when she was little, she had truly believed there were fairies who danced there, at the edge of her vision, about to take her somewhere no one else could go...

When Renia’s mind emerged from the fog that possessed it, hearing was the first sense that returned to her.

‘Do you think she’s dead?’

‘No. Though it could be arranged...’

Her heart sank. The nightmare her wandering mind had taken her to had been bad enough; now she was waking to another. The last voice was that of Dailo, Ceri’s nephew. The Hendynion might have decreed that Renia was guiltless and should be left alone, but the only thing that exceeded Dailo’s hatred for her was his contempt for the old men.

There was nothing she could do, not for a minute or two until the rest of her senses and the power to move came back. Nothing but build terrifying pictures of what Dailo could do to her in that time. But it sounded as though he was moving away.

‘Dailo... no, not when she’s like this...’

‘What do you take me for, Ianto?’ There was a thudding sound as Dailo returned and dropped whatever he was carrying. ‘I’m just preparing for when she wakes up. I want her good and scared before I’m done with her.’ *Well, that’s a certainty*, thought Renia. Mind and body were in connection now and the fearful images her thoughts had conjured up were making her heart race. *Come on*, she willed her body, *be mine again*.

SHADOWLESS

‘We’re with you there. We don’t even have to hurt her. Mind you – ’ an unpleasant laugh from a third voice was echoed by others around him ‘ – if that’s what it takes to make her see she’s not wanted round here, I’d not be averse.’

Sight was back. They were starting to surround her. Renia could see light and dark through her eyelids when they passed between her and the sunlight. Her mind raced to think of a way out of this, and she was aware of feeling returning to her body.

‘What’s she been collecting in that basket, d’you think? Poisons?’

‘Something to help her with her hexing, I’ll be bound.’

Now she felt furious. These idiots spent more time in the woods than she did, and they didn’t recognize a basket full of ramsons? She pitied the village girls, if they ever had to endure any meal their menfolk had cooked. That bolstered her up a little, and she decided to try opening her eyes.

She saw legs. She looked down towards her own feet, as best she could from that angle, and saw Dailo standing there, hefting a stone the size of an egg in his palm. Bigger stones still lay in a pile beside him.

‘So, the “demons” that possessed you have departed, have they?’ he enquired in mock concern. ‘Good, because my business is with you, Charity bastard.’ He dropped the stone on her leg, hard enough to hurt but not to harm. ‘Get up.’

Renia did as he said, unsteadily. She swayed a little but caught herself from actually falling – sure enough that none of the boys would. The stones they held were softer than the expressions on their faces. She knew that most of them saw anyone who received Charity as less than human. She stared back at Dailo, but took in the people to either side of her from the corners of her eyes. Find the weak spot in the circle; that was her aim. Damn, Ianto wasn’t in view, the boy who had at least shown some principles. She’d thought to go past him, but he must be behind her and there

SHADOWLESS

was no telling who was to either side of him – it could be the biggest bully boys in the village, barring Dailo of course.

Dailo had moved to pick up her basket and what was left of its contents. He held it away from him as though it was full of sewage, the handle balanced on one finger.

‘They’re ramsons.’ He turned his look of disgust on her.

‘Wild garlic; you cook with them,’ Renia persisted doggedly.

He tossed the basket contemptuously at her feet. ‘As if any of us would be stupid enough to eat anything you’d made, child poisoner.’

She drew a breath to defend herself, let it out again knowing it would be wasted effort. He stared at her a moment longer and bent to pick up his remaining stones; then a click of his fingers and the circle of boys started to walk slowly round her.

‘See our faces, Charity bastard? You can’t walk into the village without one of us seeing you, and you know that wouldn’t be a good idea.’ The faces passed before her, eight in total, all set in a way that confirmed Dailo’s threat. Even Ianto’s. ‘We’d really have to do something about it if you did.’ A stone lofted from behind caught her on the arm, again not hard but the unexpectedness of it made Renia cry out. A moment later a second stone hit her; she had clamped her mouth shut, but couldn’t help flinching still. ‘And I can’t say how far—’

She’d manoeuvred her foot under the basket and picked that moment to flick it up into her hands and swing it by main force into the faces of Ianto and his neighbour. It cleared a gap between them momentarily as she had hoped, and she was through it and on to the path out of the glade before they could gather themselves. She took the blows of the few stones that hit her while she ran with a feeling of perverse satisfaction. That was time wasted on aiming them that her persecutors could have used to catch her. Now she had a lead, as she had hoped; she just had to do something with it.

SHADOWLESS

The temptation to veer off the path was great but she stuck to it, knowing how easy it would be for her pursuers to catch her if she wasted her lead on beating a track through the undergrowth. In a short while the true path curved, branched then branched again, giving her a good chance of losing them.

She turned the bend and her stomach lurched as she saw the figures at the fork in the path rise from a crouching position. More of the gang; they must have had time to plan while she was out of her senses, and sent these two to delay any passers by while the rest of them dealt with her. Instantly she went left, trying to recall where she would end up as she steered a course through the trees and undergrowth.

Further into the wood, this way. There was a big glade somewhere up ahead, with three paths leading from it; damned if she could get her bearings for it though. Every turn the trees forced her into seemed to take her through brambles that snatched at her skirts or tore at her ankles. She could hear her breath catching, more like a sob than a gasp, as she reached the end of her sprinting strength; she could hear too the sounds of others in the wood, pursuing her. Even if she made the glade, she wasn't optimistic about the outcome.

The trees thinned and she was surprised to find herself there, more by luck than judgment. A fast scan of the paths out of it, and hope died. She could hear her pursuers on all of the routes, could see them on one. Though she was neither God follower nor star worshipper she looked heavenwards in her despair, and found herself staring up into the branches of two tall trees that leant together like conspirators...

The next stone bit hard. It got her right on the anklebone and really hurt, way past screaming point. But Renia was too high for them to throw anything harder than that. She peered through the branches to the neighbouring tree, the only one nearby that could be climbed;

SHADOWLESS

Dailo clung to the branch that extended towards the tree where she sheltered, and Renia knew he'd never have the courage to scramble over to this one as she had done, however much hatred there was in his eyes.

'Stone the *gwrach!* Stone the *gwrach!*'

She settled her back to the trunk behind her, exhausted, clutched a nearby branch and let the gang's chanting wash over her.

She had three alternatives. Wait, and hope they'd go away eventually; wait, until she fell asleep and out of the tree; or go down and face them. She hadn't the courage for the last; that had been drained by the jump from the first tree when she had nearly lost her hold with a thirty-foot drop below her. Instead she sat and felt tears run down her face.

A sudden roar of unbridled rage came from below, followed by yells of alarm and fear. The group of persecutors scattered from her sight, to be replaced by a lone figure who stood there, panting and furious, then turned in a full circle with a branch held aloft in his hand like a cudgel, looking for anyone foolish enough to stay. She could only see the top of his dark blond head but knew him well enough: her brother Vel. He was six feet four compared to the slighter village folk; big enough to scare her eight attackers who, when it came down to it, were nothing more than bully boys. He peered up and spotted her, his expression still furious, when a movement from Dailo caught his eye and the look went another league beyond fury as he threw the branch down and walked over to Dailo's tree. Vel was out of Renia's sight now, but Dailo's reaction confirmed what her brother was doing. Dailo tried to come further out on the branch towards her, then thought better of it and just hung on as Vel's furious face appeared beside the trunk, barring his safe retreat. Vel stared at him for over a minute – Renia would lay odds it felt longer to Dailo.

SHADOWLESS

‘Vel, don’t hurt him,’ she called across. Her brother didn’t react, just carried on staring at the bully. Then he thrust out one finger.

‘You. If you want to get down from here alive, do it now,’ he told Dailo, glowering still. Any hesitation on the boy’s part was brief; a short scramble, a squeeze past Vel to cling to the trunk, a rapid descent, and he was scampering on his way after the rest of the gang.

With Dailo gone, Vel studied his sister from his vantage point. ‘How in a believer’s Hell did you get up there, Ren?’

‘Jumped from where you are.’

He whistled. ‘Well, don’t even try it back again. Climb down as far as you can, I’ll find stuff to break your fall.’ He disappeared; she gathered her strength and began her own descent.

By the time she reached the lowest branch and clung there, arms and legs shaking with exhaustion, Vel had built up quite a pile of dead leaves and dried bracken. The drop was about twelve feet, not something she’d even dream of trying on her own, but she trusted his judgment. He’d had more than his fair share of rescuing her from situations she’d got herself into, failed tomboy that she’d been as a child – and then, more recently, from things like this...

‘Oh, *cach*, look! This was one of my best shirts, too.’ He was inspecting a tear he had found in the sleeve, far more bothered by that than he was by the deep scratch on his arm beneath it. He gave up on the shirt as a lost cause. ‘Right, I’m ready for you. Come out a bit further and try to drop about here.’

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and wriggled out, keeping chest and stomach close to the branch. Then she hooked her hands around and willed them to hold on as she slid herself off the branch, dangled for a moment, and let go. Vel didn’t try to catch her, rather directed her roll into the thickest layers of leaves, then scrambled over to help her up.

‘Thank you, Vel.’

SHADOWLESS

‘Well, I could hardly leave you up there, could I? Though how you were daft enough to get caught in the first place, I don’t know.’

Now they came to it. A sick feeling washed over her, and it had nothing to do with what had just happened. ‘They were already there when I came round. I ran but I didn’t have a chance to get away.’

‘Another falling fit? You’re all right?’ She nodded. A long pause, then he asked, ‘Did you see anything?’

She couldn’t muster a response; the terrible sense of loss from the vision had returned and overwhelmed her.

Vel sat down and patted the ground beside him.

‘Come on then, out with it,’ he urged her. ‘We’re going nowhere till I hear it.’

It was such a simple vision, but the range of emotions it brought scared and confused her. Still, she managed to describe how she’d found herself on a journey that seemed endless, and the further she went, the more isolated and trapped she felt. After what seemed an eternity of travelling, she’d entered a place that she knew was crowded with many people but everyone was a blur and insubstantial, compared to something in the midst of them that seemed to pull her ever closer. She worked her way nearer and nearer, until finally it could be seen clearly. Or rather she should say they; she had been drawn towards three hangman’s nooses. But there was something within each noose, and again she felt herself drawn forwards until she came close enough to see.

The first of the nooses surrounded a silver sun, blazing brightly. The second held a golden eagle, frozen in flight as though about to seize hold of something. The third... the third had her puzzled for some time. It held a circular grey metal band. Try as she might, her numbed mind could not make sense of it. Then, just as she was about to give up, she realized what it was.

SHADOWLESS

She halted, having reached the crux of her story, and found she was shredding what she had left of her nails. Vel was looking at her in consternation but she couldn't seem to stop herself. He put his hand gently over hers; that stopped it.

‘And?’ he prompted gently. ‘What was the grey band?’

‘It was a ring. A ring I knew.’ Her gaze travelled to his hand and he looked down too at the battered pewter ring he had worn since his coming of age, two years before.

It took some doing to calm her, because she had shocked him; Vel had never been part of her visions before. But he put up some good arguments about how unlikely it was he would ever do anything he could be hung for, and how many people must have pewter rings, and how she had worked herself up into much this same state over Rhyanna, who had soon recovered from her fever. His arguments settled Renia enough to get her started for home. At his suggestion they took the route along the beach rather than the cliff path. That would put them further out of reach of Dailo's gang, should that bunch of bullies regain their courage.

Once they were on the beach Vel relaxed a little, dawdling and skimming stones. After all these years he still marvelled at the way the sea could change its nature. Now, it was as calm as a millpond; when he had walked along the cliff top just after dawn, delivering mutton to the village, the water had been choppy. He stood a while longer gazing out to sea, the waves breaking at his feet; he could feel the beach pebbles shifting under the thin soles of his boots.

A sudden cry from Renia broke his contemplation, and his hand went for his knife. He'd just about had enough of Dailo's gang.

‘Look, Vel, look!’ It was not Dailo; Renia was pointing ahead at the surf's edge, not back to land, to a bundle being washed by the waves. A body. It was a body!

SHADOWLESS

They both broke into a run, Vel arriving first and kneeling down beside it. Whoever it was lay almost face down, jacket half off, one boot missing, one arm flung protectively round his head. Vel turned him over – a young man, well dressed in foreign clothes and with what would have been a handsome face, were it not grey from drowning.

Vel whistled. ‘No one in town this morning mentioned a shipwreck. They must have got caught on the cape, not knowing the waters. In these fine clothes this poor soul will soon be pickings for the shore scavengers. We should bury him.’

‘But he's not dead,’ Renia said. As if on cue, the young man groaned weakly and coughed out a mouthful of seawater, and turned a faintly better colour.

‘Hmm,’ conceded Vel, ‘but he's not far off. We’re nearly home... Melor will know what to do. You run on ahead and ask him to bring a hurdle back. Meanwhile I’ll see what I can do here.’

Renia needed no second bidding and scudded off over the stones. Vel meanwhile tried to use the method Melor had once taught him to get the air back into a drowned man's lungs. As he did so the young man's jacket collar fell back into place and revealed a heavy gold brooch. A moment more and Vel registered its shape, a bird in flight; and then, what kind of bird it was.

He sat back on his heels. For a moment it felt like he’d been punched in the chest; he was winded and couldn’t get his breath. Finally he recovered, and glanced up the beach at his sister. She was a long way off now. She wasn’t going to look back.

Carefully Vel unfastened the brooch, fished out his handkerchief, wrapped the brooch in it and thrust it deep into his pocket.

SHADOWLESS

The story continues...

in

SHADOWLESS

Book 1 of the Ilmaen Quartet

RESTORING THE LIGHT

Book 2 of the Ilmaen Quartet

PLAYING A DARK GAME

Book 3 of the Ilmaen Quartet

Find out more. Visit helenbellauthor.com