

*PLAYING A DARK GAME*

*BOOK 3 OF THE ILMAEN*

*QUARTET*

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Sample Pages

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## *Chapter 1 – Rumour Never Eased the Blow of Truth*

Something was afoot. No-one at Aravey that evening could have missed it. Dark had long since fallen but the entire household was still buzzing like a hornet's nest. The great hall, bright with lamps, was the place where everyone's paths crossed, and the news was passing from one person to another.

*Have you heard? The Crown is restored. The usurper Maregh is overthrown and Lemno Tekai's rule of fear is done. They had Jastur Hed Sarol sealed up in Karn and claimed he was dead; they said the same of his brother. Now both have returned!*

Penor already knew that. He might be barely sixteen and a country bumpkin to boot, but he had played his own small part in the Restoration and the hunting down of Lemno. Now he sat quietly in a shadowy corner of the hall where, had anyone noticed him, he would have cut a lost, lonely figure. It was taking all his strength to hide how much pain he was in, but the last thing he needed was someone spotting him, hauling him back to his sick bed and dosing him up. More of the meds would ease the pain, but the last dose had put him out for hours.

He heard someone say: *The Tekai passed not a mile from here, I'm told, and took a stand at Mylos with Alena Lak Terarn as a hostage.*

*That's right, said another. The Crown and his brother Kerin pursued the Tekai there - the Crown had made Kerin LandMaster of Lestar. He gave challenge to Lemno, but it went ill. They say the LandMaster lies terribly wounded, close to death. The physician was urgently summoned to Mylos hours ago...*

They moved off, still talking, leaving him in his darkened corner.

That was news.

He struggled to his feet, every move agony to his injured hip, and made his way down the hall and closer to the fire. He *had* to learn more. Till he knew for sure what was happening he couldn't think straight; and the physical pain was nothing, not compared to the worry and jealousy and anger and grief that coursed through him.

He had wanted to hear that Lemno Tekai was dead. Lemno had hung his father for a crime he had not committed. If Penor could have, he would have killed Lemno himself; but his injury had put paid to that ambition. Failing that, he was happy for someone else to do so – anyone, that is, so long as it wasn't Kerin. Kerin already possessed everything in the world that mattered to Penor. To owe him gratitude for his revenge, the last thing he could call his own – that would have been intolerable.

He pummelled his hip for its betrayal, which did nothing to help the pain but provided some perverse satisfaction. Knowing Kerin had failed to kill Lemno also brought satisfaction – of a kind. A fleeting, guilty kind. If Kerin really was at death's door, Renia would be in despair.

Renia. Just thinking about her clawed at his heart, the kind of hurt that could make him sneer at his hip and its best attempts. Renia with the sad eyes and sweet ways, who was everything to him; who was a hopeless desire. And Kerin, once his hero, had added insult to injury by giving him his blessing, his *permission* to look after her, knowing whatever happened, whether the Restoration succeeded or failed, she couldn't follow where Kerin was destined to go.

He couldn't wish Kerin ill and still claim he cared about Renia, but how could he wish the man well either, when he'd blighted every happiness he'd ever had? He shut his eyes and wished for the vainest hope of all, for time to turn back: to be at the farm at the start of summer, with his father alive and Renia just arrived and Kerin still a hero to be admired, not a rival to be resented. He could have changed things then, somehow. Some step not taken, some different road followed so that it would not

have come to this: mourning his father, hating the hero he had once admired, and knowing an end to his own misery would mean heartache for Renia.

‘They’re here!’

Extra torches were seized and lit at the fireplace as he tucked himself out of the way of the hurrying servants. Then he limped cautiously in their wake as they hurried into the black night to light the riders in.

It had to be the Crown’s party, from the number of troops surrounding them. And sure enough, the Crown was the first of those he recognised; Jastur Hed Sarol, newly restored to his high station. Close on his shoulder was Renia’s brother Vel, still watchful even though the Crown had troops around him; acting as the Crown’s protector, when that was normally Kerin’s role. It seemed likely the rumours were true.

At the back of the group was Renia’s friend Jesral. She looked unhappy on a horse, as though the moment she could be off it couldn’t come a minute too soon.

And unfortunately for Penor, here too was the physician’s assistant. He must have come out for news of his master. Now that he had seen Penor he was striding his way, clearly intent on returning his charge to bed.

Penor took one last look at the riders. There was no sign of Renia or Kerin.

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Jesral had spotted Penor as they arrived, but as one of the new arrivals, she had been shepherded off to a grand suite of rooms where, thank God, they were royally fed. She hadn’t realised how desperately hungry she was, with everything that had been happening. Now, fed and watered and with a goblet of wine warming her through, she remembered Penor.

When she got to his room he was being helped into a chair. He sat back, clearly glad to get there, and beckoned her in as the servant left. He looked so vulnerably hopeful, and her heart sank

as she realised that she wasn't going to get any answers to her burning questions. More likely, he was going to ask her ones she really didn't want to answer.

'Well, you look better than earlier,' she observed lightly. He waved a hand towards the table where his next draught of medicine sat.

'Aye. This stuff can make ye very happy for a few hours. Trouble is it sends ye out like a light. What with that and all the excitement, I've missed what's going on. So, what's going on?'

'We'll be leaving soon for Lestar; Vel and me, and Jastur – and Alena, the woman Lemno was holding hostage.'

'What about Nia?'

She paused. 'She's still at Mylos. She's looking after Kerin.'

'Looking after 'im?'

'Lemno challenged him and they fought, but Lemno won. He nearly killed Kerin, and when that failed, he escaped. They're hunting him now, but even if they catch him it can only be to exile him. The terms of Kerin's challenge, it seems; Lemno's death if Kerin won, Lemno's exile if he didn't.'

'I'd heard a rumour yon had got away.' Penor was stony-faced. Not the result he had wanted, and she couldn't blame him. 'Ye say Kerin's badly hurt?' He frowned and sat forward. 'Will he die?'

'Probably not.'

He sat back. 'So Nia'll be looking after him for a while, then. I can't believe Kerin agreed to that.' Her surprised look prompted an explanation: 'I overheard a conversation I weren't meant to hear. I took 'im to task over it and found out what were really goin'on between 'em. He knew she were... fond of him. He were more than fond of her too, only he were trying to keep it hidden, keep some distance between them – trying to make it easier, knowing yon had to go their separate ways.'

‘That was the big secret, back at the farm! I *knew* something was going on... And when you found out how he really felt, you couldn’t let her know. Well, I think that’s all out the window, after today; we’ve found out who Vel and Nia really are. That heiress Lemno took hostage? She’s their cousin.’

‘What?’

‘Yes, that was my reaction too. They’re aristocrats, Peo. From a Council family... and Kerin’s clearly had second thoughts about keeping his distance.’

It was the blow she had thought it would be. His face fell before he hid behind a shrug and a joke.

‘Well, I always said she were too good for him. Never thought she were too good for me and all.’ Then, as if the joke had taken all his energy, he seemed to wither, like a crisp new sheet of paper burning away in a fire. ‘If ye’re going to Lestar, I’d be grateful if ye can get a message to me sister. Just say I’m alright, and that,’ he said, looking anything but. The bright-eyed, fresh-faced boy from the farm was gone. Jesral had a terrible feeling that she had seen the last of him.

‘Of course I will. Orlane’ll understand you can’t come back till you’re better – and no trying till you are, you hear?’

She bent on impulse and gave him a hug and a kiss. ‘I’m so glad we had you with us this last week. I don’t think we’d have got through this without you.’

He gave a tight little nod. Nothing more. He wanted her gone.

When she reached the door, she looked round. He was throwing back the sleeping draught and hauling himself painfully out of the chair, heading for his bed before it took effect.

## *Chapter 2 – A Charmed Life*

*Kerin knew his error the moment he made it.*

*He responded, and for an instant thought he had recovered from it. His counter move would have won the fight against almost any opponent. But he had made a second mistake, forgetting this was not just any opponent. Lemno's next stroke was nothing he'd seen before, requiring extraordinary flexibility and accuracy. Its aim was clear: unbalance the attacker and seek to disarm him. Lemno managed both.*

*As the sword span out of Kerin's hand and he struggled to keep to his feet, he saw the blade coming that he could not parry, and knew at once what it would do to him. He threw himself backwards to avoid it, but in vain. It struck and cut effortlessly through, carrying him with it when it met the resistance of his ribs. But he knew it would not stop there, not a blow that hard and that precise from such a keen blade; it would drive on, through lungs and heart and backbone... He felt the breath blast out of him as his ribs went, a sharp and sudden pain, and prayed it would be a quick end, being split in two like this.*

The pain was eye-opening, enough to start him awake with a gasp. Now he realised it was a dream; but the pain was still real. That was down to his sudden intake of breath. He put his left hand to his right side; heavy strapping there confirmed his memories of what had happened.

But he should be dead. There was no way he should have survived that blow.

'My Lord?' A long-faced man loomed over him. He saw the badge of Aravey on his collar, remembered the man from the drugged haze of last night and relaxed a little. He was one of those tending to him.

‘Just a twinge. I am all right,’ he lied. Breathing was still hard. He concentrated on making it slow and shallow, getting the pain to a bearable level. Relief flowed through him now, as he remembered all else that had happened yesterday.

I have done my duty, and all is well, he told himself. Jastur is safe, and restored as Crown, while Maregh is exiled and Lemno has fled, powerless. That was all I needed to do.

But relief quickly ebbed away and dismay took hold. He had succeeded in his mission, but failed dismally in his role. A true LandMaster of Lestar possessed good judgement and mastery in single combat. Lemno had known Kerin’s worst faults all too well, using anger and pride to provoke him into making an unnecessary and personal challenge. And still his pride ruled him; it hurt far sharper than his wounds to know that Lemno had beaten him. Worse still, in his arrogance, Kerin had set terms of combat that meant the Crown had to let Lemno go free.

He was paying for his arrogance now. This was a wound that could end his career. Braced for the pain, he tried to raise his sword arm. He couldn’t. There was barely any movement in it. He dropped the effort, fearing he had ended his time as LandMaster of Lestar when it had barely begun.

Yesterday it seemed, his luck had finally deserted him. He hadn’t expected to see another day of this life. By the look on his face when he struck, Lemno had hoped so too. Death had never scared Kerin; his faith in reincarnation was unshakable. He had feared the business of dying, lest it be slow and painful, but he’d known that if Lemno got the chance he would choose a quick kill. Overconfident of his skills, Kerin had never expected to give Lemno that chance.

Yet yesterday he had feared death. Lemno’s blow struck, he could not breathe, and the end was certain, yet in that final moment he found himself overwhelmed by the need to stay in this life. It wasn’t what he’d felt in the past at such desperate moments – that mindless biological imperative to live, that made you fight like a demon. That came from hope. This fear came from desperation, from knowing he was dying and the fight was

already lost. Yet he needed to stay, even if he was broken in body and purposeless for the rest of his life. Better a half-life here than his next life; because in the next life, he would have no recollection that Renia had ever existed.

But still this life was a charmed one. Again he had survived impossible odds; and these miracles always happened when Renia was around, as if she magically protected him, just by being there. For months he had tried break the cycle, partly out of fear for her, partly from wounded pride. It was hard for him to admit to needing anyone's help. Time and again he had pushed her away; yet by design or accident they had always ended up on the same path, and somehow her being there made everything right. Then the day came when he realised it wasn't her help he needed. It was *her*. Hell, that had shocked him ...

She was not there now, he suddenly realised; only the Aravey servant, waiting attentively. 'Where is Nia?' He spoke to fit his breathing, and it came out harsher than he'd intended. The man raised an eyebrow.

'Nia, my lord? – do you mean Lady Lakdarion? She is with Moyen. She asked me to say she will be back shortly.'

Of course, the man knew her by her Ilmaenese name, Sian Lakdarion. A pretty name, but one he wasn't yet used to. Reassured, he closed his eyes again.

The *maci* was still in his system and he drifted in and out of sleep, between mistimed breaths that stabbed him into wakefulness. After one such awakening she was back, sitting by the window; still in the shirt and trousers he had seen her in last night, suggesting that she had not been gone far, or long. Her breakfast sat ignored in front of her as she stared out of the window, deep in thought. She nursed a cup in her hands but wasn't drinking. She hadn't noticed him wake. He kept quiet and watched her, while he still could. She had stayed, as he had asked. It didn't mean she intended to stay forever.

From here, he couldn't see her sad eyes. They were the first thing he had noticed all those months ago, back when she flitted namelessly through his restless fever-dreams like some

otherworldly creature. She'd be gazing down at him one moment, gone the next, until the fever broke and he woke to find she was no dream figure, no creature of magic. She was just a girl who had nursed him back from the edge of death last spring – a near-drowned corpse, salvaged from a Mhrydaineg beach. She hadn't known then what a terrible threat she and her brother had brought into their house, but it would have made no difference. She would still have cared for him – in every sense of the phrase.

He had learned her given name, Renia, but not a true surname. She and her brother were parentless, adopted by a farmer who had reluctantly trusted him with Renia's secret and, even more reluctantly, her safekeeping when she and her brother chose to accompany him back to Ilmaen. Barely more than a child, she'd understood better than any of them what the future held; and yet she had come anyway. Scared witless, and still determined to help see his mission through.

It was only recently he had begun to call her Nia. The diminutive suited her, but another admirer had given it to her. It had taken Penor's interest in her to make Kerin realise she was no longer the child he'd met last spring. She had grown up fast, enduring more than anyone should have to, and she had earned his heart as she did so, though he'd been blind to the bargain. She was a sanctuary for him, a place where his heart and soul could rest easy, but he couldn't cross the threshold. Marriage was not an option he could offer, thanks to Council and his own benighted sense of duty; and her moral code meant anything less than marriage would only bring her shame. He sat outside the sanctuary doors, cold, starving and thirsty, knowing they would yield with a touch; but he would not break them down.

And now, she was Sian Lakdarion. A name that altered everything. She and her brother were the lost heirs of Darion; Ilmaenese, high-born, part of the powerful Hedhiugen dynasty. As his social equal, Council would raise no objection to such a union.

He allowed himself a few moments of euphoria before he dragged his hopes back down to earth. He had offered marriage,

and she had promised to think about it, but she hadn't said yes, and he knew only too well it might be better for her if she didn't.

He watched her stare into the middle distance, the drink an inch from her mouth all but forgotten. She had learnt her true name in the midst of a day of madness, and he had compounded the madness with his clumsy proposal. He couldn't help himself. She had endured so much misery, mostly of his making, so he had seized the moment and told her how he felt and what he could offer her now that he couldn't before. He hoped that, despite all he had put her through, she would understand his reasons and forgive him.

It was a lot to ask. And in the end, what could he really offer her? He had to acknowledge his many personal faults – arrogant, thoughtless, moody, hot-headed behind a façade of coldness – and even if he managed to master all that, he knew he could never compromise on his commitment to his Crown. What of his position, his wealth? No, she needed neither to be happy. There was little but his looks to tempt her, and as the Crown's champion there was no guarantee how long he would keep them, or his life. Assuming Jastur still wanted him as his champion, after yesterday's failure.

Then she turned and saw he was awake, and that look of hers, beyond all describing, banished his dark thoughts.

She called the retainer to fetch the physician and sat on the bed, looking him over anxiously.

'How do you feel?'

'As if I have been run over by a wagon. As if it's a miracle I'm here. I was sure Lemno had killed me.'

'You would have deserved it. I'm so angry with you I could beat you black and blue,' she declared with a look that said otherwise, 'if only there was an uninjured part of you worth working on.'

'I was a fool.' *I put you through hell*, he thought. *I dangled our future in front of you, and then nearly threw it away for a piece of ill-judged vengeance.*

‘Someone had to challenge him, and no-one else stood a chance.’ She paused. It felt like there was a ‘but’ coming. It never arrived.

‘It was the Eagle that saved you. Look.’ She reached to the cabinet beside the bed and passed him a chunk of twisted gold, all that was left of the Lestar badge of office.

It marked him out as Crown Champion, that badge; the holder of the Lestar Eagle was an elite warrior, hunter of Ilmaen’s enemies, protector of its Crown. He rested the emblem on his bandaged chest and turned it around in his hand, the outstretched wings and body scored and folded by Lemno’s blade. It had plainly absorbed the main force of that blow, though he had been lucky. If Lemno’s strike had not made him turn to catch his balance, nothing could have stopped him being sliced half through. He had seen that fatal blow delivered on the battlefield all too often, in Federin. He had inflicted it on a man himself, in one bloody melee.

It was not all luck though. There was a trace of ‘I told you’ on Renia’s face. He passed the Eagle back to her, knowing that he would have taken it off if she had not stopped him. He had argued, and only gave in to placate her; again she had been right. It was a lesson he was slow to learn; trust her insight, even on the most insignificant points.

It was a gift and a curse, this ability she had to far-see and future-see. She had long thought she was the only one, until that day in a travelling show wagon when old Atune had changed her world — his too — by revealing that there were others, and yet more still with the potential for it. But not him: the old woman had made it clear that he would never be able to see what lay afar or ahead as they did. That world was closed off to him.

It explained why he would stride so boldly into trouble that others would avoid. A failing on his part, he had thought, though Atune had assured him it was not necessarily a bad thing. And to be fair, his instincts generally served him well; his bold approach usually worked. Renia’s ability to see beyond normal senses, wherever the knowledge came from, was a hand on his

collar for when it went wrong. If not for her, his spectacular lapse of judgement yesterday would have ended his life.

That it hadn't, and that he still wanted to carry on living, was entirely down to her. Shame would otherwise have driven him into his next life. *How* had he lost to Lemno? And why had Lemno let him live?

'He must have tried to finish me. What happened?' he asked.

Her calm look went, replaced by agitation. Not a memory she wanted to revisit.

'He tried to, yes. And he would have done, only Jez knocked him out.'

'She did? How?'

'She threw a salver at his head... oh dear, that sounds so stupid now.'

'I owe my life to Jez and a plate? She must regret it already,' he observed wryly. Renia threw him an even more stricken look and he sought to take back the words. 'I joke; we have had our differences, but they are resolved. I know she is a true friend.'

She shook her head.

'It's not that. There's more I haven't told you yet. Do you remember Atune, saying there are others like me?'

'Of course.' Renia had been relieved and happy back then to learn it, but she did not look it now. She looked... frightened.

'You owe Jez your life because I couldn't help you. Lemno was too strong for me...' she breathed that memory out like a dying breath. 'Lemno is like me,' she confessed. 'He can do the things I do, and more. When you fell – dead, I thought – he got into my mind. He knows... *what* I am. And Kerin, he knows something about my past. He was trying to tell me something about my mother, I couldn't tell what; I was too busy trying to keep him out.'

‘Then he said you were still alive. He challenged me; told me he was going to kill you and that I could try and stop him but I would fail, I wasn’t strong enough. And I wasn’t, Kerin. I tried! I tried so hard. You’d be dead now if it wasn’t for Jez. And he’s fled, who knows where, and I’m scared what else he can do...’

One little piece of knowledge, and everything about Lemno was explained, working its way through his astonishment and concern for her. He could make sense at last of all those people who feared Lemno, hated Lemno, yet did what he wanted – or like Renia, fought it in vain. Except for me, Kerin thought. With none of it in me, I might have succeeded – but like a fool I played into his hands, with my anger and my need for revenge and my bloody impatience. And here she is, blaming herself.

He leant forward, ignoring the pain.

‘You’ve saved my life many times over. If you couldn’t this time, I know it wasn’t for want of trying.’

‘No, you don’t understand. How can I be around you now? I’m a danger to you, Kerin. To Jastur too, and I always will be. Don’t you see? Lemno can get into my head. Who knows what he might learn from me – or what else he might make me do? No. When you’re better... I’ll go. I have to.’

Even through the pain, it was as though she’d gutted him. He had to fight to master the hollow, sick sensation.

He had let his guard down yesterday, pouring out everything he felt. Something about her made it so easy to bare his emotions; with her he could be openly angry or impatient, and when he had thought Jastur was dead, grief had made him reveal far more to her than he had ever intended. When he realised what he felt for her was much more than trust, he had put on a front, turned cold, even lied to cover how he felt. He had meant to save her from hurt; but by the time he was done, he doubted he could have hurt her more.

It seemed that his rehearsed lies were more convincing than his honest passion, so he mastered himself and sifted through what she had said, searching for counter-arguments.

‘You worry yourself beyond good sense. He’s gone; he’s heading for the border and into TorMilano, I would guess. Besides, I know you both of you well enough by now.’ Speech was painful and she tried to stop him, but he waved her protests away. ‘You are part of his vendetta now: that’s why he taunted you to try and stop him. But if he could control you, don’t you think he would have *made* you harm me, and get the revenge he wanted twice over? He couldn’t. Lemno can’t make you act against your will; not five feet away, much less leagues away. You might not have been able to stop him doing what *he* did, but that was not a betrayal. I know what you have done for me, things I could never ask of anyone – things I would have forbidden you to do, had I the chance! I have many fears for the future, but if there is one thing I have complete faith in, it is that you would never betray me.’

His words calmed her, thankfully. Since his ribs felt like they were being both speared and crushed, he tried a question that would make her do all the talking.

‘Tell me of the others. Is there any news?’

‘Vel and Jez have gone on to Lestar with the Crown and Alena. Vandin too; his gunshot wound was not as bad as it looked. Penor is staying at Aravey. The physician wants him to rest till he knows if he’s fit to travel.’

That was all she said. She went quiet and thoughtful again, but at least she was no longer agitated. He lay back, exhausted, relieved to have distracted her, but still dreading what lay ahead.

Her fears were almost the opposite of his. It was how she might try to use her ability to protect him, that worried him. She had, thank heaven, mostly taken heed of Atune’s warning and kept it hidden. But she’d used it to save them on the scaffold, he was sure, though he couldn’t say exactly what she had done. He could only pray that no-one else had realised. A life with him could easily tempt her to use it again. She understood the risks all too well, but if she thought it was worth ignoring them for him, he had to make her think again.

It would be Court life for her now, regardless of whether she took his offer. Court life, with all its etiquette and traditions – not to mention the politics and manoeuvring and double dealing. People ever on the watch for a mistake they could take advantage of. Heaven help her with that!

Or Moyen could. He could help ready her for Court like nobody else. Yes, that offered a chance. Assuming he could get her sworn promise not to tell Moyen why she needed his help.

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