

The Alliance of Isian

By Serena Clarke

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4

“I am so sorry,” Elani began, a tender look entering her eyes as she embraced her sister.

Gabrielle was alarmed and unsure what to make of this display.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I must leave, right away,” Elani replied.

“What? Why?” Gabrielle cried out and clutched her sister tightly. “You can’t leave me now!”

Elani closed her eyes and sat on the edge of the bed.

“We have received a message from Nirine,” she began in a soft voice. “It’s Garin’s father. He is—he is very ill.” A tear slipped down her cheek. “He begs Garin to return as soon as possible...that he might say

farewell. Garin is eager to return.”

“And of course you must go with him,” Gabrielle sighed, understanding her sister’s devotion to her husband. The two would never be apart for longer than was absolutely necessary.

Elani nodded. “You know I do not wish to leave you alone. I am so sorry to be leaving you. But I must. He needs me.”

Gabrielle nodded, straightening her shoulders. “I will be fine.” Her voice was filled with determination, but her eyes betrayed her loneliness.

Elani rose and kissed her sister on the cheek.

Just then, Alec entered the room. He greeted Elani as she left the room and then addressed his wife.

“I am ready to go into the village,” he said.

“As am I,” Gabrielle replied, determined to keep her sorrow at bay. She hoped to distract herself from her disappointment at her sister leaving by spending some time with the people. She confessed inwardly that she still held a little fear for the days adventure.

She was surprised when she found the people to be rather pleasant and the streets full of hardworking villagers, not the violence and filth that she had expected.

They spent the majority of the day among the villagers, helping them, giving advice, and listening to their woes as well as their suggestions to better the kingdom. She was pleasantly surprised by the wisdom

and selflessness of the people.

“Would you like to see a trick?” Gabrielle asked sweetly to a young girl who stared admiringly at the princess’s beautiful gown.

The girl nodded shyly.

“All right then. Here it goes,” she said and waved her hands distractingly in the air. And then, magically, a flower appeared in her once-empty palm.

“Beautiful,” the girl sighed as she handed her the flower.

Another young girl joined them. “May I have a flower too?” the girl asked.

Gabrielle smiled and repeated the trick and placed the flower behind the girl’s ear.

The girls giggled and then stopped abruptly.

Gabrielle followed their gazes behind her. A man stood in the doorway of a house with a scowl on his face. His arms were crossed and his meaning could not be mistaken. The girls ran to their father and he ushered them into the house and shut the door quickly behind them.

This was not the first display of dislike and distrust that she had observed on their visit to the village. Though the people welcomed the prince into their homes with loving arms, they scowled at the princess and made her feel unwelcome.

Though she was disappointed by their actions, she understood their feelings and tried not to let it get

the better of her. Gabrielle turned her attention to the prince.

“This is for you and your brother,” Alec said and handed a young girl a gold coin. His smile was disarming and the girl blushed and giggled shyly. “Get something special for supper tonight. And make sure to share with your grandmother.”

“Of course, Your Highness!” the girl cried and ran off down the street.

Alec put his foot in his stirrup, ready to mount his horse.

“Your Highness?” an old man cried out as he hobbled quickly down the street.

The prince paused and turned around.

“Yes? May I help you?” Alec asked kindly.

“Oh no! I need no help!” the old man said warmly. “But my daughter needs help. She is ill and refuses to call for a doctor. She is a tough one. She says she cannot afford it so she will fight her way through the fever. But this is the worst I have ever seen her. Can you please help her?”

Alec turned to one of his guards and spoke a few quiet words and then turned back to the man. “It is done. I have sent for a doctor. They will meet you back here and you can take them to her. Come to the palace in the morning and we will discuss your payment method.”

“I have very little,” the man said humbly. “But I

will give what I can.”

“I am sure we can figure something out,” Alec said.

“Bless you, Your Highness!” the man said and clasped the prince’s hand.

Alec mounted his horse and he and his wife continued down the street.

“That was kind,” Gabrielle said in a small voice. She found herself admiring her husband as she witnessed his actions with his people.

Alec looked at her in surprise, as if he had forgotten she was there.

“Nobody should be denied the assistance of a doctor because they are not wealthy enough,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

“It is not just that. It is the way you help them. You smile. You let him take your hand. You are genuine.”

“You are surprised,” he said.

She was unsure how to respond. Knowing the Tandorians beliefs in helping the poor, she was not surprised by his actions, but by his sincerity.

They remained silent for several moments.

“Your Highness, it is getting late. Should we head back now?” Phillip, one of the guards said.

Alec agreed and the couple and their two guards behind them trotted down the alley in silence. The alley was darkening quickly and Gabrielle found

herself on edge.

Henric, the second guard behind them, grunted in pain. They stopped abruptly and turned around. The guard slumped to the ground.

"Henric!" Phillip cried out and jumped off his horse to check on the man. Then a figure was beside him, holding a knife to him.

"What is going on?" Gabrielle breathed.

"Your Highness, get out of here!" Phillip yelled and spun away from the figure, drawing his sword smoothly. And then the two were battling fiercely.

Alec pulled out his own sword. Understanding the wisdom of his guard's words, he said to Gabrielle, "Come, let's go, quickly."

She nodded, but said, "What about Phillip?"

"He can handle himself. He is well-trained."

But before they could move, two more hooded figures stood in front of them.

Gabrielle cried out in surprise.

Swiftly, Alec dismounted his horse and swung his sword, first at one figure and then the other. They fought ferociously. Gabrielle could tell the hooded men were skilled, but Alec was better.

After fighting for several minutes, Alec knocked the first man's weapon to the ground and pressed him against the wall, his sword at his throat.

Suddenly, arms were around her and she was pulled from her horse. She cried out in surprise. One

arm wrapped around her waist and another held a knife to her throat. She gasped in terror as she realized that Phillip, their highly skilled and well-trained guard was laying unconscious on the ground.

Alec hit the man he held over the head and he slumped to the ground. The second man pointed his sword at Alec, while the third man dragged Gabrielle down the alleyway and to a waiting horse.

Gabrielle refused to be taken without a fight. She stomped on the man's foot and elbowed him in the side, causing him to loosen his grip on her. The knife slid over her throat before it slipped away. She elbowed him again and forced her way out of his arms.

While she ran, Alec swung at the second attacker. The man tried to defend himself, but he was no match for the prince. Alec was not one to play around and test out his opponent. He fought to end the battle. He fought to win. He swung his sword over and over again, wearing down his opponent quickly and then rammed the hilt of his sword into the man's head, knocking him unconscious.

By this time, the third man had caught up to Gabrielle and yanked her onto his horse. The horse sped them away before Alec could catch up to them.

Gabrielle's heart pounded as the man held her tight against his chest to prevent her from escaping his grasp again. Though her vision was blurred from the bouncing of the horse's ferocious gallop, she glanced

back and saw that the alleyway was filling with guards. She felt relief at the sight of Alec jumping onto his horse and speeding after her.

It was not long before Alec was upon them. He came alongside the horse and punched the man furiously in the face. The attacker's grip on Gabrielle loosened. Alec grabbed her arm to steady her as the man swayed behind her.

Courage filled Gabrielle as her husband came to her rescue. She balled her hand into a fist and slammed it down on the man's thigh. Then she elbowed him in the side repeatedly until he let go of her completely. She grabbed the horse's reins and pulled on them. The horse came to an abrupt halt, causing the man to slam into her back.

Alec stopped his own horse and yanked the man off. He scrambled to his feet and attempted to run, but Alec toppled him to the ground once more. Spinning the man onto his back, Alec put one foot on his chest.

"Do not move," he growled. The pounding of hooves announced the arrival of the guards. Alec yanked the man to his feet and instructed the guards to tie him up and take him along with the other attackers back to the palace.

"I am sure the king will have several questions to ask them," he said.

Gabrielle still clung to the horse, trying to slow her racing heart.

“Are you all right?” Alec asked, coming to her and offering his hand to help her down.

She gratefully accepted his help. He lifted her off the horse and set her gently on the ground. Her legs wobbled for a moment, causing Alec to hold his hand to her back to steady her.

“I am fine,” she said, taking a deep breath and shaking her head to rid herself of the remnants of fear.

“You are bleeding,” Alec said, his tone filled with anger.

She touched her neck where it had begun to sting. Her fingers came away with spots of blood where the man’s knife had slid across her throat. “It’s just a scratch,” she reassured. “Thank you for coming after me,” she said, deeply grateful that he had saved her before the attacker had gotten very far.

“I am sorry you were threatened,” he continued angrily. “You are my wife and this is my kingdom. You should feel safe here. I am sorry this has happened.”

“Who do you think they were?” she asked. “And what did they want with me?”

Gabrielle held her head high as she stared down at the three prisoners. Though her heart pounded, she was determined to hide her fear and show strength. She would not allow anyone to think she was weak,

especially her new husband.

Alec stood beside her and his eyes narrowed as he studied the men with a fierce expression on his face.

“Who are you?” the king questioned in his deep, authoritative voice.

The men refused to answer. Their eyes were focused on the ground, the ceiling, anything but the king.

“Do you not have a seer?” Gabrielle whispered to Alec, confused by this method of questioning. In Isian they would already have the information they needed. “Or a witch perhaps?”

Alec shook his head. “The magical creatures do not come to our kingdom. There is no place for them here.”

Gabrielle gasped. She had heard these rumors but could not believe they were true. She thought it strange that there were no dragons or centaurs or even fairies at her wedding, but she had not realized it was because they were uninvited.

“Not even centaurs?” she asked in shock.

Alec shook his head again and refocused his attention on the attackers.

“Who sent you?” the king asked.

The questioning went on but to no avail. The prisoners would not answer. Finally, the king tired of their silence and sent them to the dungeons.

“Perhaps some time down there will loosen

their tongues,” he sighed and the men were hauled away.

“What would they want with Gabrielle?” Alec asked once the men were gone. “Ransom?”

“Whatever they wanted, they did not accomplish their task. And I am sure this will not be the end of it. They will try again,” the king said.

Gabrielle’s eyes widened. “You think I am in danger?”

“Do not worry, my dear. We will double your guard. Do not go anywhere alone,” the king cautioned. “And we will keep you safe.”

She nodded gratefully.

However, Gabrielle could not expect the Tandorians would keep her safe. She had to do something more. When she was alone in her room, with her guards outside her door, she sat down on the floor in the middle of the room and closed her eyes. She concentrated, trying to decide what she should do and then it came to her.

Opening her eyes, she whispered a spell and magic floated around the room, coating it in a layer of protection against trespassers. She then whispered some more words and the magic floated around her body. She knew she could not put a protection spell on herself, but she could at least use magic to give herself strength and peace.

When she was done, she wrote a letter to her

parents about the attack, trying to include as little detail as possible. She did not want them to worry or think her incompetent in her duties. However, they must know that there were enemies that needed discovering. She hoped they would have some helpful information.

It had been several days since the attack and Gabrielle wished to put it behind her. The wound on her neck where the attacker had threatened her was healing and she was determined to let her soul heal along with it.

They had questioned the prisoners every day, trying to get information from them, but as of yet, they had found nothing. Messengers had been sent to all of the kingdoms, making inquiries to see if anyone had any information concerning the attacks.

"Gabrielle," Alec said, catching her attention as he walked toward her. When he stood before her, he continued, "I was thinking of arranging a picnic. The people seemed to enjoy seeing us together. I think it would be good for morale to do something more. Show them we are getting along. Unless you are still shaken by what happened, of course."

She lifted her chin and shook her head. "Not at all. I am perfectly fine. I think that is a splendid idea." Though it was not entirely true, she would not reveal her fear.

"Good. Make yourself ready. Meet me down

here in thirty minutes," he said.

Gabrielle nodded and hurried to her room.

An hour later, she heard a knock at the door. One of her maids went to answer, while her other maids continued putting pins in her hair. She returned after a moment.

"Who was that?" Gabrielle asked.

"It was His Highness. I told him you are almost ready, my lady," she replied and continued preparing Gabrielle's riding clothes.

Several minutes later, there was another knock at the door.

The maid went to the door again and returned a moment later and began to dress the princess.

"Was that the prince again?" Gabrielle asked.

The maid nodded.

"He is very impatient," Gabrielle huffed. "Does he not know that it takes a woman much longer to dress than a man?"

Several more minutes later, the door flew open and Alec strode into the room.

"Gabri—," he began, but was cut short when she walked toward him.

"I am ready," she said.

Alec narrowed his eyes as he studied the woman before him. His expression held something between awe and disapproval of her appearance.

She was dressed in her riding gown, boots, and

hat. Her hair was done in ringlets and gathered up in several ribbons. She knew she was overdressed for a simple picnic, but she looked stunning, as was her responsibility.

She glanced over his attire and was disappointed once again. "Is that what you are wearing?" she asked with a frown.

"Yes," he answered in a resolute tone, not to be questioned.

She shook her head with disapproval. She had noticed that the man she married gave little thought to his own appearance. He simply wore what was most conducive to his needs. He wore riding boots that were in dire need of polishing, a pair of tan breeches, a simple blue shirt, and his leather doublet. It was similar to what he wore most days, other than special occasions when he wore his finest dress clothes.

They left the castle and rode through the village toward the hilltop just outside of the city. As they rode, the people stared at them in awe. Gabrielle knew they were impressed by her lovely appearance. She also knew they were curious about the union between the two enemy kingdoms.

She led her horse up beside his and murmured, "Alec, take my hand."

He looked at her in surprise, but to her approval he quickly realized the wisdom of her words. He smiled warmly at her and then grasped her hand. He

lifted their hands high enough for the people to see.

"You are wise," he said.

"I understand the importance of showing our people that we are trying to work together," she said, the cheerful smile never leaving her face.

Gabrielle was impressed by Alec's willingness to go along with the charade. It was important that they be examples to their people of unity and strength. She had been unsure of his abilities to be a leader and an example to his people.

Gabrielle once again grew uneasy by his intense stare.

"You look lovely, my lady," he said, just loud enough for the people to hear.

"And you look handsome, my lord," she responded. She wondered if he was being genuine or if he only said those words out of obligation, to appease his people.

When they exited the village, Gabrielle immediately let go of his hand. Alec led their group up the small hill to where the servants had prepared the picnic. When they reached the top of the hill, the guards spread out, giving them enough room for privacy but staying close enough for protection.

"This is wonderful!" Gabrielle cried, seeing the display. A low table had been placed on the ground with a plump cushion on each side to sit on. On the table were silver platters piled with a variety of meats,

cheeses, bread, fruit, and pastries.

Alec smiled at her display of enthusiasm. She sat on her cushion and waited for him before pulling some grapes onto her plate.

Alec picked up a leg of turkey meat and tore into it. When the grease dripped down his fingers, he licked them off. He was halfway through his leg when he realized Gabrielle had stopped eating. He glanced up and found a disgusted look on her face. She quickly looked away from him and began to cut into her turkey leg with a knife and fork.

The Tandorians' awful etiquette at the dinner table was something that Gabrielle had a hard time getting accustomed to. The tables were always boisterous. Music and raucous laughter and belching filled the air. The way one showed their appreciation for the taste of the food was by licking the juices from their fingers and stuffing their mouths with more food than they could chew.

She glanced up when she heard him sigh. He placed the piece of meat on his plate, wiped off his greasy fingers with a napkin and picked up his fork and followed her example. She smiled, pleased by his attempt to appease her and use better table manners in her presence.

"Would you like to take a stroll by the stream?" Alec asked when they had finished their dessert.

"That would be pleasant," she said, trying to be

agreeable.

Alec escorted her toward the stream and they began walking beside it. Unsure what to say, the couple remained in silence for several minutes.

"This is rather pointless," Gabrielle huffed, stopping abruptly and putting her hands on her hips.

Alec's eyebrows rose as he gazed at her.

"Should we not at least talk? Get to know each other while we must be in each other's company?" she suggested.

He hesitated. "I fear we may not like what we find."

Gabrielle's brows came together as she glared at him. "Are you saying you have no desire to know me better because you know you will dislike me?"

"No," he quickly replied. "I only meant that you might not like the things you find out about me."

She sighed. "Well, we are in this marriage whether we want to be or not. And honestly, we do not like each other much anyway. But we barely know each other. Perhaps if we knew more about each other, we could at least be more understanding," she reasoned.

"All right," he agreed, seeing the wisdom in her words.

Gabrielle smiled and spun around to continue walking, but as she did so, she did not realize how close she had come to the stream and her foot slipped on the edge of the bank. She gasped and Alec made a

Serena Clarke

grab for her arm, but it was too late. She screamed as she fell into the shallow water with a splash.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Serena Clarke is the author of **The Treasure of Isian**, book 1 in the Isian Series.

She has a Bachelors Degree in Graphic Design and is a member of the Red Mountain Shadows Publishing team. She is passionate about learning, reading, art, and design. She enjoys designing her book covers as much as writing her books.