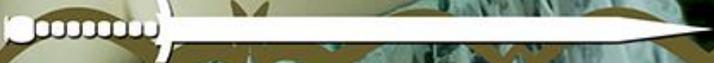


TRICIA BALLAD

DAUGHTER  
OF  
*Oreveille*



## Chapter One

May 1649. Isle of Oreveille, Faeland Sea.

Brianna walked silently through the grove of banana trees. Their wide, flat leaves offered welcome relief from the afternoon sun. She absent-mindedly fingered the moonstone that swayed from a delicate golden chain at her throat. Communing with her chosen elements of Earth and Air helped tune out the incessant droning of her companion.

“It really is a beautiful estate, Mademoiselle Oreveille. But surely you can see how neglected it will become once your father retires. An island such as yours requires constant care,” Alston clearly mistook her silence for agreement.

“Stepfather,” Brianna murmured, coming out of her trance before she gave into the temptation to float away like one of the thousands of fuchsia blossoms that had drifted down from the trees to litter the ground beneath her feet.

“A little hot to be out walking,” A lighter male voice filtered through her consciousness, still clouded from her too-short time within the elements. She opened her eyes and saw Gabriel pruning the trees. His deep black eyes contrasted sharply with his sandy brown hair and weathered skin. Those eyes never let her forget that he was of Fae blood, despite his human mother. Brianna smiled, remembering the many long, happy childhood hours she and Gabriel spent climbing these old trees, and she envied him now as he sat amongst the limbs while she was forced to walk the lane with this arrogant son of a...

“You dare speak so to the Daughter of Oreveille?” Alston Feurlet sneered. “Get back to work, before the overseer has you flogged!” He raised his head taller and walked down the path. “Brianna, this is exactly what I was telling you about. Even the servants have begun to disrespect the authority of your House!”

Brianna glanced at Gabriel and rolled her eyes in disgust at Alston’s back. Gabriel grinned and bowed in mocking subservience. Brianna stopped on the path and spoke.

“There may be truth in what you say, Monsieur Feurlet. But fear not, I would not dream of burdening a man such as yourself with such a large estate.”

Alston stopped and turned to face Brianna, ready to protest her misunderstanding. She held up her hand to silence him, a gesture usually reserved for servants and human slaves. Brianna was careful not to smile at the look of shock on his aristocratic face.

“I would sooner marry Gabriel than you. He, at least, understands how to care for the trees.” Finally, she allowed herself to smile.

Alston’s back stiffened at the insult, however sweetly delivered. He turned and bowed to Brianna. “Forgive me for overstepping my bounds, Mademoiselle Oreveille. I shan’t waste any more of your time. Perhaps we shall meet again as friends.”

“Perhaps,” she replied. Brianna stood still, her face carefully neutral, until Alston passed through the orchard toward the dock.

When he was finally out of earshot, she shuddered. “Horrid man!” She spat out the words and leaned against the banana tree where her oldest friend still perched. “What do you think, Gabriel? Is the island so unruly, simply because I have not yet married? I know my mother’s husband does not care for the property as well as he should. But I cannot think that replacing him with a man such as that,” she gestured toward the departing Alston Feurlet, “would be an improvement.”

Gabriel dropped his shears as he swung down from the branch, landing lightly on his feet. He stood next to Brianna, although she noticed sadly that he did not stand as comfortably or as near to her as he once did.

“Me and Da, we keep things running as best we can. We need to post nightly guards, and regular patrols, but without direct orders from the Master of the House, they don’t listen to me,” he gestured toward the slave village.

Brianna smiled. “Are you looking to move up in the world? Perhaps I could convince my mother’s husband to name you steward. Then they would listen to you,” she offered, reaching across the space between them to take his hand. Her smile faded when his arm stiffened at her touch.

“Leave me to the trees,” Gabriel mumbled. “If I don’t get them pruned by sunset, I’ll get that flogging your Monsieur Feurlet was so keen on! If the Master’s in the mood to listen, ask him to order patrols.”

Brianna sighed. “If you like.” She hesitated, wishing she could recapture the easy camaraderie of the banana grove.

Gabriel nodded as he picked up his tools and moved on to the next tree in the row without looking back.

Brianna watched him study the branches for a moment, then resolutely made her way back to the main house to explain to her mother why she had rejected yet another fine young man from an old and powerful family.

## Chapter Two

Gabriel held his breath as he stared up at the branches of the banana tree, listening for Brianna's footsteps. As she walked away, he turned and allowed himself a glimpse of the woman he loved. Her obsidian hair was pinned in an impossibly complicated arrangement, with a single ringlet allowed to escape to adorn her right shoulder. The glossy black curl contrasted with the pearlescent skin she had favored since they were children.

"You cursed fool..." he muttered to himself, looking down at his own drab, tanned arms. His father may be a Fae, but Gabriel had not inherited the ability to alter his appearance any more than he could use other forms of power. Brianna's face, lit by the glowing symbol of her House above her eyes, remained in his mind. That mark glowed brighter than ever when she took his hand, reminding him not to forget who she was. And who he was not.

Gabriel straightened his shoulders and began the walk down to the slave village. Brianna might tie his heart in knots, but dwelling on it would not do anyone any good. It was well past time he took the boys to patrol the island, and the long walk around the perimeter would clear his mind. Oreveille was situated at the nexus of two borders, yet its strategic importance was easily overlooked if all you saw was the beauty of the place. The island stood where the outer depths of the Caribbean gathered into the massive, ancient volcanic crater that held the Faeland Sea.

The House of Oreveille had been established five thousand years ago to guard this part of the Faeland from the constant threat of kraken and leviathan, as well as bands of jotnar brave – or stupid – enough to sail the rough waters of the Atlantic in their raiding.

"And the Fae are an easy target," Gabriel said to himself. "They may have power, but not many of them can wield a sword like he means it."

He reached the small two-room cottage he shared with his father, the island's overseer. It wasn't large, but the glass windows were intact and his father had even built a front porch, giving himself and his son a place to sit in the evenings to avoid the stifling heat indoors. Once, years ago, it had been painted a cheerful yellow and white, and while the paint was faded now and peeling in places, it was still in better repair than most of the cottages in the village.

Several such cottages were built in a ring around the slave cabins. The outdoor servants, those with half-Fae blood, were allowed to live in them, and were expected to keep order and deal with any problems with the human slaves. The dirt paths between the haphazardly placed slave cabins alternated between dust and mud, depending on the season. The wretched beings who lived in them were usually captives, poor fools who wandered too close to the border between Gaia and the Faeland. Some few, such as himself, had been born here, but most were not.

There were perhaps a dozen half-Fae and human men in the village when he approached. The half-Fae stood idly, watching the human men rebuild one of the sewage ditches that ran through the place. After too many heavy storms, the ditches often collapsed, and had to be re-dug.

"Shore it up with timbers this time, boys!" Gabriel shouted.

One of the half-Fae turned to face him. William. When they were children, he had boasted of his plans to replace Gabriel's father as overseer. "Waste of good wood. We've got plenty of humans to dig out the ditches when they collapse."

"Aye, but the smell until they get it dug out is something terrible," Gabriel countered. He watched the shirtless human men digging knee-deep in filth and mud. "Fix it properly this time and we won't have to do this every three months."

The other man grunted and turned back to the work at hand. "Keep digging!" he commanded, catching sight of a human who had straightened up to get a breath of fresh air.

Gabriel grimaced at the sound of the whip cracking through the air. "It's well past time to patrol the borders, boys. I need a half dozen men."

"What do you need so many men for?" William sneered. "Afraid you might meet up with a stray dog and need reinforcements?"

Gabriel did not answer. He had learned long ago that the only way to win an argument was with silence.

"These men are needed here. This ditch must be dug out before nightfall." William was going to be stubborn.

"Really? You need so many just to watch a handful of humans? Afraid they might turn on you?" Gabriel answered.

"They must be properly supervised. We've had three escape attempts this month!"

Gabriel nodded. He had turned a blind eye to all three of them, and the last two had made it to open waters. He looked at the wretched man whose crime had been stealing a breath of fresh air. Two lines of crimson decorated his bare back. Perhaps there would be a fourth escape attempt this month, Gabriel mused.

"Fine. Then I'll patrol alone. So that you will have nothing more to fear than your own filth," Gabriel replied, walking away.

This was not the first time he had walked the border of the island alone. Truth be told, he preferred it this way. The human slaves cringed away from him and kept huddled in pairs and small groups, and the other half-Fae tried to imitate their full-blooded masters in arrogance. Gabriel shrugged. He needed to pay attention to the sea anyhow, not his companions.

Gabriel walked for the better part of an hour before he saw tracks in the wet sand. They were small, like the footprints of a newborn child.

"Gobeleins," Gabriel swore. They were often used as scouts by larger and more intelligent creatures.

He knelt down to examine the tracks. They were headed inward toward the stables. The Oreveille warhorses were bred to carry a man in full armor. A gobelein would not be able to reach its halter, let alone try to steal one. They were probably simply there to gather information. He had to be sure the gobelein scout did not return to his masters. They were not particularly intelligent, but were intensely loyal to the jotnar that fed them and kept their dens safe from predators. Where there were gobelein scouts, there were raiders nearby.

"Shouldn't have wasted time arguing," he muttered to himself as he broke into a run. Perhaps if he could capture the gobeleins, the Master of the House would take his insistence upon a night watch seriously. He could not hope to patrol the entire island himself.

Gabriel heard the horses kicking and neighing before he reached the stables. Something had them agitated. He slowed to a walk and listened as he entered the practice yard. The stable had stalls for close to fifty horses, although it was mostly empty these days. If he paid attention the horses would save him the trouble of searching every stall. He slipped inside and blinked, giving his eyes time to adjust to the dim light.

The sound of splintering wood and the high-pitched shriek of the gobelein drowned out the sounds of nervous horses.

He reached the agitated horse and found the gobelein standing outside the stall. It looked like a hideously oversized infant, about two feet tall and naked except for a thin layer of coarse hair covering its body. There was no innocence in this creature, however, which made its appearance all the more disturbing. The legend was that these creatures were half-Fae children left on beaches and hillsides to die, to save their Fae mothers the embarrassment of acknowledging a tryst with a human man. According to the stories, jotnar would find them, and the ones that weren't eaten on the spot were brought back to the creatures' dens and raised as their own. Gobeleins were the result.

“It would explain their loyalty,” Gabriel mused as he drew his sword and pulled his knife from his belt. Unlike the Fae and even most half-Fae, Gabriel had no ability to wield power, so he learned to rely on his fists, and later, his sword. Fae power wasn’t everything.

The gobelein looked up and shrieked again. In the back of the stable, Gabriel heard scuffling footsteps. The second gobelein had fled. He would chase it down, but first he would have to deal with this one.

As the stable door slammed shut, the terrified gobelein pulled a filthy knife from its pouch and charged. Gabriel held his sword low and easily parried the gobelein’s clumsy swipe at his knees. In an instant, he brought his own knife up, gutting the creature.

He stepped over the mess and ran out the back door, following the tracks toward the docks. He had to catch the beast before it made it offshore, or there would surely be another jotnar raid. They lost more men and horses in every raid, and every time, the huge beasts made it closer and closer to the main house. Gabriel was not certain how many more times the meager defenses of Oreveille would withstand them.

With every step, his stomach clenched harder. The docks were in sight, but the gobelein was gone. He was too late. Gabriel stopped at the water’s edge, scanning for a boat, but the horizon was clear. There was nothing more he could do but go back and clean up the mess in the stable.

Half an hour later, he wrapped the dead gobelein in a length of rough burlap and carried it to the Great House. Perhaps, if he dumped the bloody evidence at his feet, the Master of the house would listen to him and order a night watch.

From the front, the Great House was perfect and terrifying. Its white marble columns seemed to stretch into the clouds, and every one of the dozens of windows seemed like an eye, staring at any poor soul who had to walk that path to the grand entrance. Gabriel and the other servants were lucky enough to be spared this fate. They approached the Great House from the rear, where it was less meticulously maintained, and therefore less intimidating.

Gabriel shifted his burden onto one shoulder as he veered away from the front of the house. As he approached the rear entrance, Madame Oreveille’s glamour began to fade, and the bare, weathered wood showed through. Gabriel could not remember when the men had last been called to work on the Great House, but his father told stories of being a child and carrying water and buckets of nails for the men who kept the ancient building alive. He touched the brittle wood as he rounded the corner to the back of the house. It needed to be repaired, almost as badly as some of the cabins in the slave village, but the Master of the house wasn’t likely to bother as long as the Mistress could keep the appearance of grandeur at the front.

As he walked in the servant’s door, past the kitchen, the cook called out to him. “Gabriel, me boy - come say hello to an old woman!”

Gabriel shook his head. “Got a package to deliver to His Drunkenness. If he doesn’t toss me out of the house, I’ll stop and drink a cup of tea with you.”

“Get on with you then,” she replied. Gabriel smiled at the fondness in her voice. After his mother disappeared all those years ago, she had taken him in and loved him like one of her own.

He trudged up the narrow, dark staircase at the rear of the house. The center of each stair was worn to a softness that cupped the servants’ tired feet. A small comfort in a house designed more for show than warmth and happiness.

At last, Gabriel reached the fifth floor and entered the main part of the house. The Master of the house spent a few hours in his study overlooking the lake and the stables, before making his way to the billiard room below. He shifted the hastily wrapped body to his other shoulder and knocked.

A snore was the only reply he got.

Gabriel knocked again, louder this time, and again heard only snoring from within. He tried the doorknob. It was locked, as he suspected. Gabriel swore under his breath, and aimed a

single kick at the rotting wood in the center of the door. It splintered, and the snoring abruptly stopped. Gabriel cleared away enough fragments of the door to reach through and unlock it.

“What the Devil did you do to my door?” the man inside spluttered.

“It needed fixed anyway,” Gabriel replied. “Sir,” he added after a long moment of silence.

“Get out of my study!” the Master of the house screeched, pointing at what was left of his door.

Gabriel dumped the dead gobelein on the dusty mahogany desk covered with half-filled ledgers and unopened letters. “Trouble’s on its way.”

The other man simply stared. In the ballroom, glamour gave him the look of a man at his prime. Here, in his study, Gabriel saw him as he was - his yellowed skin sallow and hanging, his hair, once glistening black, now thin and dulled with streaks of grey. He reached a bony hand instinctively toward the crystal decanter of brandy - the only thing in the room that saw frequent use.

“Master of Oreveille,” Gabriel spoke with military formality, hoping to jar the man’s memories of former glories. “I captured this gobelein scout in the stables. Its companion escaped before I could catch it, and is at this moment reporting back to its masters. Your orders, sir?”

“Orders?” The master of the house of Oreveille slung back a snifter of brandy. “Two gobeleins hardly seems like a threat,” he slurred. “Get back to your work. And fix my door!” his voice rose as he refilled his glass.

Gabriel turned and left. As he walked down to the kitchen for a cup of tea he grinned, wondering how long it would take the Master to realize he had left the dead gobelein behind.

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Daughter of Oreveille is available at

<http://www.amazon.com/Daughter-Oreveille-Cycle-Book-ebook/dp/B00ESK2DZS/>

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