

✠ Chapter 28 ✠

Liam held his unmarked cloak close about him as he approached the horse pickets. He had managed to slip through the Gwyneddi camp without attracting notice thanks to Ivo's "borrowed" cloak, and was nearly free. A thrill of excitement rushed through his adolescent veins as he stealthily approached one of the grooms on duty, sinking into the shadows behind the hapless man. Liam darted his hand to the man's neck, using the physical link to force control of his all-to-human mind, and bidding him sleep. Stalking down the line, he did likewise to the other grooms, one by one seeing that they would sleep for the next hour or so. This was easier than he had anticipated.

Once the grooms were incapacitated, he looked down the line for a horse that was fit for a king. His eye immediately fell on Kelson's favorite charger, Besieger, but guilt stayed his hand there and his gaze moved down the line. Besides, Besieger's shining white coat would glow like a beacon in the moonlight. There was Morgan's great black Donas, and he showed promise. Liam approached the beast's head, and the horse rolled his eyes and flattened his ears in distemper. "Soo, soo, soo," Liam whispered gently to Donas, soothing him with voice as he held out his hand for the great beast to smell. Donas' nostrils flared as he took in this strange boy's scent, and the velvety skin touched Liam's hand briefly. It was enough to take control.

The warhorse calmed instantly, so Liam settled a blanket on his back. The beast actually whickered as the saddle was put in place, eager for exercise. "Patience, friend," Liam whispered as he pulled the girth tight. Next he gently coaxed the bridle over the great head, slipping it over alert ears and securing its buckles with sure fingers. When Liam finished, he stood back to examine his handiwork, then fumbled in a pouch at his belt. After a moment he pulled out a length of charcoal and rubbed it over the saddle, muting out the markings of the Duke of Corwyn.

When he was satisfied, he pulled himself up and set Donas cantering toward the nearest camp exit. The guard on duty challenged him, but that was to be expected. "I am bound for Cardoso," he stated, opening his cloak to reveal his bright Haldane livery and a leather courier's missive tube. "I bear urgent messages from the king."

He was waved through, and he set his spurs to Donas' sides. The great beast surged forward, galloping fiercely away from the camp toward Cardoso. That wondrous beast didn't appear to tire as Liam urged him on, leaning close over the horse's neck as he sought to put distance between himself and the camp. As its fires faded, growing ever smaller, Liam finally let Donas slow to a canter as he tried to examine the ground in the weak moonlight. When he was finally certain he could no longer be seen from camp, he swung around in a giant circle and turned Donas north, towards the river.

After a half hour or so, judging by the moon's passage, Liam pulled the now trotting Donas to a stop by a grove of trees and jumped off his back, looping his reins around a low branch. That tether was reinforced with a mental command for the charger to stay put. He whipped Ivo's cloak off, then unlooped a sack slung across his back and unbuckled the belt at his waist. Everything fell to the ground as he tugged off his overtunic, emblazoned with golden Haldane lions on a field of crimson.

Liam nearly tore the sack open in his haste to get at its contents, which he spilled to the ground. Digging through the heap, he pulled out another overtunic, this one done in Torenthi silver with the black leaping hart of the Royal House of Furstán. He tugged it over his head, then re-fastened his belt. Next came the matching mantle, the black hart set on a field of pale gray silk that shimmered like silver in the moonlight. It was fastened about his neck with a matching hart clasp, held together with golden chain links. Now only one thing remained.

Scouting the surrounding trees, Liam found a small sapling that was growing straight and true. It would suit his purposes. Unsheathing his short sword, Liam used it as an axe to fell the

small tree and strip its branches. This would dull his blade, and he did not have a sharpening stone, but there was little choice. He cut the trunk to the proper length, then dragged it back to his scattered belongings. The last item from his sack was his colors, which Mairona had made for him, gray silk stitched with black fixed to a canvas backing. There was some difficulty in securing the banner to the rough-cut sapling trunk, but with some effort it held sound enough.

Satisfied, Liam stuffed the missive tube, Ivo's cloak and his old Haldane livery into the sack and tied the bag to the rear of his saddle. Mounting the spirited Donas with his colors in one hand was challenging, but on the third try he managed to settle into the saddle without losing hold of the staff he made. Setting its butt in one stirrup, he paused to bow his head. "Lord Christos and St. Niklos, ride with me and lend victory to this night's efforts," he beseeched heavenward. After crossing himself, he turned Donas' head to the mouth of the mountainous river valley and let the charger loose.

Ivo entered his king's tent tentatively, hesitant to interrupt his discussion with the Dukes of Corwyn, Claibourne, and Cassan now that Mahael was only a day's march away. He fidgeted, waiting to be noticed by any of the great men slouched over a camp table. It didn't take long for Kelson to look up, holding his hand up for the dukes to pause.

"Well?" Kelson asked. "Where is Liam? I sent for him nearly an hour ago."

"Your Highness," Ivo stammered, clearing his throat. "No one has seen The King of Torenth since nightfall."

"Then search the camp to a man!" Kelson returned. "This is no time for his childish antics!"

As Ivo bowed, there was an explosion at the entrance as another fair-haired squire blustered in, this one in the Duke of Corwyn's livery.

"Brendan!" Morgan greeted his stepson in surprise.

"Your Highness!" the boy bowed to the king, breathless, before turning to Morgan. "My lord, someone has stolen Donas!"

"What?" Morgan exclaimed, coming to his feet.

"The sentries may have seen him," Brendan continued. "A young man in Haldane livery rode out on a black charger, claiming he was bound for Cardosa with missives from the his Highness the king."

A young man... Liam was tall and looked old for his twelve years, and in the dark he could easily be mistaken for a young man of sixteen or so. "Liam!" Kelson muttered, pounding his fist on the table. "Damn!" What was that fool up to? "Morgan!" he called, bringing his head to bear on the silvery-blond duke. "Send out every scout that is not watching the Torenthi army. I will have that boy found!"

"Aye, my liege," Morgan bowed, springing to action. This was certainly not one of the contingencies they had thought out.

"Do you think he is trying to join the Torenthi army?" Dhugal asked. Ewan's expression dictated that was exactly what the Claibourne duke thought, but Kelson shook his head.

"Liam knows that Mahael would just as soon kill him and take the crown of Torenth for himself. I do not know what trick that boy intends to carry out, but I am of a mind to have him thrashed soundly when he returns."

It was nearing midnight when Liam found the marker, white silk tied to a bush near the river's edge. He reined Donas in, hesitating in fear. This was an enormous gamble he was taking,

trusting a man who had served his father years ago, and the surety on the bet was Liam's life. He had not yet reached manhood, and was far from ready to die, but his duty drove him onward. Taking a deep breath, he sent Donas plunging into the river's waters at the marked ford. The water was icy out of the mountains as it swirled up to Liam's ankles, but Donas did not seem to mind. He gained the opposite bank in a few minutes, and Liam took a moment to make sure his colors hung freely before heading east.

In minutes he could hear the creaking of harness and the clink of metal around him, but he could not see through the darkness and the trees. His heart threatened to leap into his throat as he continued forward, holding his back straight and his head high. Light flared ahead as a torch was lit, and he saw a line of twenty mounted men arrayed before him. Pulling Donas to a halt, he squinted into the firelight to make out the men's devices. His attention was taken by the sounds of horse and armor behind him, so he whirled his mount and watched the circle close at this back. There was nowhere to run. This had better work.

Turning Donas' head around, he walked the charger toward the torchlight until he could make out the arms emblazoned on the men's surcoats. At least the one he had expected was there, wearing the device of a sea serpent.

"My lord Aklos," Liam called as he moved to the edge of the torch's circle of light. "I thank you for heeding my wishes and meeting me here."

"Who are you that we should heed your word?" the man returned. In reply, Liam rode forward until the light hit fully on his face and colors.

"You expected me, did you not? I am Lajos of Torenth, your king. You served my father long and well, my lord Aklos. Can you look on my face and doubt that I am his son?"

"Liam," Aklos sighed in recognition, nudging his own mount forward until it stood nose-to-nose with Donas. "An angel came to me some nights ago and bid me follow my rightful king. How may I best serve you?"

Liam smiled in relief, knowing his life was spared this time. "Help me eliminate Mahael's threat to my throne. Do that, and his grand duchy is yours."

"What of the Gwyneddi threat?" Aklos countered.

"There is no threat there," Liam shook his head. "I have come to know the Haldane of Gwynedd very well these two years past. He desires only peace, so he may continue to heal the rift between Deryni and human in Gwynedd."

"Then I ride with you against Mahael. My life is yours," Aklos vowed.

The Gwyneddi scouts finally found Liam just before dawn, riding at the head of five thousand Torenthi men. At the news, Kelson assembled his full army on the plain, where everyone watched the valley mouth and waited. Kelson sat restlessly on Besieger, his mind storming within.

Liam had lived at Rhemuth for over two years now, and after the first few weeks he seemed happy, and had made fast friends with Kelson's cousins Rory and especially Payne. Or so it seemed. *How could I have been so deceived?* Kelson muttered to himself with one breath, the next cursing Liam for having been such a poor pupil that he thought he, an untried boy of twelve years, could lead five thousand men against Kelson's fifteen, but then pride and vanity had been the downfall of much older and more experienced men. Still, how had this boy of twelve years duped not only Kelson, but Alaric, Dhugal, Nigel, Duncan, his whole circle of advisors? Damn, only Ewan had been right.

A much more unpleasant possibility lingered underneath. Liam had been the one to give

Mahael's ring to Mairona, and all their plans hinged on her scrying efforts. What if Mahael knew, and had been feeding false information? Damn, damn, and damn.

The glint of metal shone at the valley's mouth, and Kelson watched in stony silence as all five thousand men emerged on the edge of the plain. They were trapped between the river and Gwynedd's men, who outnumbered them three to one. This would not be pleasant, but at least it would be easy.

Oddly enough, the Torenthi men were not fanning out in battle formation, but stayed strewn out in the narrow marching column to which the valley had previously confined them. Could Liam steal no seasoned battle commanders with these men? Kelson's distaste grew as he realized this would be more akin to helpless slaughter than any real battle.

Then something stranger happened. Two men rode lead, one of them appearing to be Liam, who was indeed mounted on Donas. They halted, and a line of white banners rose over the first length of the marching column Kelson gaped stupidly for a few moments, then clamped his jaw shut before his own men could see his astonishment.

Liam and his companion shouted something to the nervous men, then turned their horses towards the Gwyneddi army and rode forward at full gallop, Liam's royal colors flying in the wind. Motioning Dhugal and Morgan to join him, and calling on his personal guard, Kelson cantered forward to meet the pair. One eyebrow rose when he got close enough to see the other man's device, a sea serpent circled to bite its own tail. This must be the general Mairona had seen.

"Hail, Prince Kelson, King of Gwynedd" Liam called as he reined in. "Greetings."

"Would you mind telling me where you have been since last evening?" Kelson asked evenly.

"Aye," Liam grinned. "I wish to keep Mahael away from my throne. Yesterday he had twenty-eight thousand men to your fifteen. Today he has twenty-three, and you have twenty. Better odds, do you not think?"

"And fourteen thousand of his men are still on the Torenthi side of the mountains, thinking I am in Meara." Kelson couldn't help but grin back.

"Your twenty thousand will meet Mahael, who now only has nine thousand in the immediate vicinity," Liam finished. Kelson laughed, more a release of tension and anger than humor.

"To think," he wondered, "just minutes ago I was lamenting that Nigel's lessons on warfare had fallen on infertile ground. He will be well pleased to hear of this."

Liam flushed, then gestured to his companion. "This is Lord Aklos of Brustarkia, who served my father. He has pledged his faith to me."

"Lord Aklos," Kelson nodded greeting. "You have our thanks."

"I serve my king, as I have been bidden by God," Aklos returned, crossing himself in the eastern fashion.

"Dhugal." Kelson turned to his foster brother. "See to the integration of our new brothers in arms, and make sure they are well fed."

"Aye, Sire," Dhugal nodded, pulling his mount away.

"I would wish to assist," Aklos interjected, concerned about the treatment of his men. Liam looked questioningly at Kelson, who nodded.

"Go with the Duke of Cassan, and rejoin me when you are satisfied." Liam affirmed. Aklos

nodded his thanks and farewell before falling in at Dhugal's side. Liam urged his mount forward to stand beside Kelson, but turned to Morgan.

"My lord Alaric, I hope you will forgive me for borrowing Donas. He is a remarkable beast with great spirit and heart."

Morgan chuckled, shaking his head. "After the blessing you just delivered, you can keep him. That was an act worthy of a king, and a king deserves a noble steed."

"Aye," Kelson agreed. "Alaric thinks I was precocious at your age, but you have me soundly beat."

Flushing again under the weight of all this praise, Liam could barely murmur his thanks. After a beat he looked up with awkwardness. "Kelson, Aklos said that an angel told him to break faith with Mahael and join me. Can that be true?"

"It depends on what you think angels are," Kelson told him. "If you hold with the common view of heavenly bodies descended to earth, like the archangels, I would think it unlikely. However, if you hark back to your Greek, *angelos* means 'messenger,' so an angel may be any messenger of God, even an earthly one. I would wager I know this angel's name."

"Who?" Liam wondered.

Kelson grinned. "Do not tell Aklos, for it would be a shame to unsettle his faith. It was Mairona ní Dhugain de Haldane."