

✠ Chapter 29 ✠

The battle was joined shortly after dawn on the next day, and Kelson watched from a rise with Liam and Aklos, all surrounded by his personal guard. The Gwyneddi army had engaged just as Mahael's men left the valley's protection, attempting to tease and draw them down the river by making it look like Gwynedd was being pressed back. "Just a little more," Kelson murmured, "a little more—aye, that's it—Now!" He commanded, waving his hand. Horns sounded a call, and half of Kelson's army broke away from the rear to swing around Torenth's flank, trapping them on the side and closing off the valley's mouth. Now they were surrounded on three sides by Gwynedd's soldiers screaming for blood, and backed by the impassable current of the river. Mahael's standard was visible on the river's bank, surrounded by a thick cluster of men. There was nowhere for them to maneuver.

That was when the Deryni tricks came into play. A giant double-headed eagle screamed through the sky, golden wings glinting in the sun as its purple body gathered to dive on a company of Gwynedd's men, who looked to break despite the demonstration they were given a few days ago. "Liam!" Kelson called, holding his hand to the boy. Liam took it, lending his strength and trust as Kelson called forth a crimson dragon, golden wings flapping protectively over Gwynedd's men, shrieking defiance at the eagle. The Gwyneddi soldiers roared and pressed into their Torenthi adversaries, pushing them toward the river. The eagle and dragon dissolved as they met, illusions posing no threat to anyone on the field.

"We can play that game, too," Kelson muttered, picturing a fierce golden lion running rampant through the Torenthi men. "*Selah*," he whispered to himself, *let it be*. A giant of a beast roared on the river's banks, shaking its great mane before charging at Torenthi troops. They milled in confusion, but were more hardened to Deryni battle tactics, and quickly rejoined the battle as the lion leaped harmlessly among those to fought desperately to keep Gwynedd's forces from reaching their lord.

That lord was not willing to concede defeat just yet. A half-circle of flame leaped up behind the Gwyneddi men, trapping them between fire and foe. How disappointed the Torenthi must have been when that wall of flame sputtered and fizzled in a cloud of black smoke. Kelson grinned, knowing that his men's impromptu watering of the plain had not been in vain. Aklos clucked in appreciation.

"I shall have to remember that trick," the Torenthi lord commented. "It works better than I thought."

"Aye," Kelson agreed, then sucked his breath in concern as he saw Corwyn's standard at the head of a wedge pressing through the Torenthi men. "Take care, Alaric," he whispered, knowing that the Deryni duke would be just a few paces from that standard, surrounded by danger, depending on his legendary prowess in arms. "St. Camber, guard and guide him."

Opposite Corwyn, the Cassan standard also pressed in, and Dhugal was certainly leading that charge. Between the two, Claibourne's colors formed a third point, cutting the Torenthi men off from one another and pressing towards Mahael's thinning circle of safety. Just as they were about to close, Kelson's attention was ripped to Corwyn's banner, which wavered dangerously.

Please, Kelson begged heavenward, holding his breath as his body went numb. *Please, rise, colors of Corwyn!* The acts of war bear no mind to a king's wishes, though, and Kelson held his breath as the banner swooped downward ever so slowly, disappearing from the battlefield. That could only mean one dreadful, impossible thing.

"No!" Kelson cried, tears pricking his eyes as a hole opened in his heart. Morgan had been his father's closest friend, had protected and taught Kelson those first few uncertain years he had

tenuously clutched to his throne. Morgan was the only person who had made his father's loss bearable, his closest remaining link with Brion. How could Morgan fall? "No, sweet *Jesu*, not Alaric!"

"The Duke of Corwyn is a close friend?" Aklos wondered with some sympathy.

"Aye," Kelson choked.

"He is a man of great honor," Liam added, wiping his own tears away.

"Your friend has not died in vain," Aklos offered. "Mahael's own standard has fallen, and his men throw down their arms. Congratulations, King of Gwynedd. Your prowess has won your war with a single battle."

"Not my war," Kelson returned bitterly. "This was never my war." On the plain below, his men raised their weapons and cheered in victory, but their king was sick at heart as he spurred Besieger down to the battleground. He could not cry for his friend, not yet, for this occasion required a triumphant vanquisher. It was times like this he hated being the King of Gwynedd.

Liam pulled up to his side, sniffing as tears flowed freely. Looking at the boy-king in compassion, Kelson reached over and placed his hand on Liam's shoulder. This poor lad was learning the lessons of manhood too early, just as Kelson had been forced to do. "Nay, Liam, we are not allowed to grieve yet. Our men cannot see us shedding tears after they have worked so hard to deliver us such a complete victory. Shield your sorrow until we can share it in privacy tonight."

Nodding, Liam snorted in his attempt to stop the flow from his eyes. Dirty hands rubbed the wetness from his cheeks as he gulped, schooling his face to seriousness. It was not the joy that his men should see, but it was a good deal better than grief. In silence they rode to join their cheering men, followed by Aklos and surround on three sides by Kelson's guard.

Just before they reached the remnants of chaos, Liam reined his horse away toward the men he had stolen from Mahael. Kelson looked after him in surprise, then motioned six of his guard to follow the boy. They quickly closed around the boy-King of Torenth as he stiffened his back, preparing for his duty.

"You do not wish to join him, Lord Aklos?" Kelson wondered, turning to the Torenthi general.

"I would remain, if I may," the man returned. "I wish to see what manner of man has the care of my king."

"He will not need my care much longer," Kelson replied, motioning Aklos to his side. "Last night Liam truly became Lajos of Torenth, and I am very proud of his deeds."

"My king speaks very highly of Your Highness. You prepare my king for his crown with firmness and compassion," Aklos commented. "I did not expect that."

"Because Gwynedd and Torenth have warred for generations?" Kelson asked, examining Aklos closely. "Over two hundred years neither has gained supremacy over the other, so we have been at stalemate, merely rattling our shields every few years or so to prove we are still there. What has either of us gained? If the stalemate ended by conquest, I know my people would never willingly accept Torenthi rule, and I am certain your people would not take kindly to a Haldane king. Occupation would only increase the fighting, and lead to more loss of life, leaving either of us open to risk from outside."

"You are wise beyond your years; indeed, beyond most men," Aklos said.

"I have learned my lesson in Meara, which has twice now been a conquest by marriage

instead of war, and is still unsettled," Kelson smiled wanly, then turned serious again. "Fighting only weakens us. However, if we can learn to stand together, independent allies, who could be our challenger?"

"I see why my king has such high praise for you," Aklos confessed. "I like your vision."

The progress across the battlefield seemed too strange and dichotomized to be even a nightmarish dream. The victorious men of Gwynedd cheered their king's progress, and that king grinned at them, outwardly recognizing and sharing in their triumph. Behind the façade, Kelson looked at the end results with horror; severed heads and arms scattered amidst his soldiers' feet, horribly disfigured men crying in their death throes. It was the very picture of the evil that men could do to each other, made more ghastly by the celebration of its doing. And Morgan—Oh, God, Morgan—

The Claibourne tartan rose before Kelson, and he recognized its duke a short distance away by the coronet on his helmet. "Ewan!" Kelson called, but his cry was lost in the post-battle din. "Ewan!" Kelson shouted, and finally the duke spun his horse to face his king and raised his sword in salute. "Ewan! Did you see where Morgan fell?" The highland duke gestured incomprehension. "Where did Morgan fall?" Kelson repeated, but the duke merely tapped at his helmet, indicating that he couldn't hear. Shaking his head, Kelson raised his hand in salute and turned to the west.

There the colors of Cassan still flew high, and Kelson kicked Besieger into a trot in search of another duke. The fighting had been thick and gruesome here, dead men with faces smashed beyond all recognition, unarmored footmen hacked to pieces. A severed hand still clutched a spear, holding on to the only defense of life well after that life had ceased. Another man had lost his helmet, and his perfectly preserved face was permanently twisted in the horror and pain of death as his brain matter oozed out of a hole hacked in of his skull. And the smell of blood and death... Kelson gagged once or twice, then willfully forced his stomach to still its heaving. Thankfully he hadn't eaten breakfast, so his men wouldn't see him retch. The urge to vomit was overcome by relief when he found his blood brother standing on the ground, displaying no major harm as he tended to his fallen men.

"Dhugal!" Kelson shouted, and the border duke spun around.

"My king!" he returned as Kelson jumped off his horse. After Morgan's loss, Kelson had never been so glad to see his blood brother, and he ran across the space to embrace Dhugal fiercely.

"Mahael was taken live," Dhugal reported as they separated.

"Good," Kelson returned, not really caring how Mahael had been taken. "Did you see where Alaric fell? Can he still live?"

"What?!" Dhugal sucked in his breath. "You saw Alaric go down? Where?"

"He was surrounded by Torenthi when I watched his standard fall," Kelson told Dhugal, his voice catching.

"No!" Dhugal exclaimed, freckles starkly popping out of his face as he went pale. "Are you certain?"

"I saw the Corwyn griffin trampled in the mud," Kelson confirmed miserably.

"Aye," a voice called out from behind. "My standard bearer decided I was more important than the colors when my idiot horse went down. I should have kept Donas."

Kelson turned slowly, gaping as if he had heard a ghost. His jaw worked up and down as his

mind struggled to comprehend the impossibility of what his eyes registered. "Alaric!" he finally cried, forgetting all kingly bearing as he launched himself at Morgan, squeezing the duke in rough embrace and thumping him soundly on the back. "Alaric, I thought you gone!"

"You would miss me?" Morgan asked as he pulled back, touched to see the tears of joy streaming down his king's face.

"Miss you?" Kelson exploded, batting his gauntleted hands at his cheeks in a vain attempt to dry them. "Miss you? Who would be my conscience?"

Grinning, Morgan took his king by the shoulders. "Kelson, you have not needed my proddings since the Mearan war. Your father Brion would be proud of you today, I should think."

"Thank you Alaric," Kelson smiled, his eyes still glistening. "But do not think I no longer need you. If you ever dare to get yourself killed, I will kill you!"

Morgan laughed, releasing his king. "You would first have to duel with my wife for that privilege. Now, what would you like done with Mahael? He is not taking kindly to his loss."

"Few men would," Kelson muttered, his face hardening.

"Aye, but they would take it with grace. I do not understand the Torenti words he has been screaming since he was bound, but from the way he says them I do not think they are polite."

Snorting, Kelson removed his helmet and pushed back his mail coif to scratch his itchy scalp. "Liam should be present for Mahael's confrontation, and I think that after his first battlefield review he will need some time for prayer and rest before facing his traitorous uncle. Let Mahael stew for the day, and have him brought to me at sunset."

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Neither the passage of time nor the dulling effects of a mild dose of merasha, the drug that confused and disabled Deryni senses, did anything to improve Mahael's disposition. In fact, as he stood bound in Kelson's command tent, he proved he could curse just as fluently in Gwyneddi as in his native tongue, disturbed by merasha's chaos or no. Kelson was quickly tiring of the man's insolence, and suppressed a sigh as his eyes darted to Morgan and Dhugal, then Liam and Aklos. They all appeared just as aggravated that the examination for this impromptu trial was not even cursory, since Mahael proved insolent and so far answered no questions.

"Mahael, I sorely tire of this nonsense," Kelson finally uttered.

"I do not recognize your authority, Haldane!" Mahael spat. Liam's own frustration grew beyond his ability to contain it.

"You will recognize mine!" the boy finally shouted. "You will tell me why you call men to arms against your king!"

"Morag had so many lovers there is no telling who you real father was. You are no closer to the crown than I am." Mahael grinned maliciously. Liam's normally good-natured face glowed red as it twisted in fury.

"We both know that is not true," Liam retorted. "Even if it were, it does not matter who my father was. The crown comes to me through my mother Morag. This is for her." He slugged Mahael's gut, a strong punch for a boy of his size. Mahael grunted on impact.

"Liam!" Kelson exclaimed in anger. "He is a prisoner and will be treated with honor, even if

he has none!"

"He is my subject, not yours, and it was not your mother he insulted!" Liam snapped back, leaning towards Kelson slightly as he stood his ground firmly.

"Aye, the slut Jehana," Mahael continued at Kelson. "Which one of her playthings begat you?"

Kelson's eyes flashed. "Liam, you have my apologies," he said evenly before his fist smashed into Mahael's nose. Blood spurted, streaming into Mahael's mouth as he gasped for air, reeling from a blow delivered by a full-grown warrior. "That is for my lady mother. My lady wife also wishes to send her tidings for sending your mercenaries to drive her out of Druimfada. These are her greetings." Mahael bent double as Kelson's fist sank into his abdomen, much more powerful than Liam's strike. Mahael stumbled to his knees as Kelson stepped back, flexing his fingers. "My queen wished the aim to be a bit lower, but I am a sympathetic man. Gag him!" Kelson ordered his guard, smiling coldly as Mahael choked when he struggled against his subduers.

"Lajos," Kelson called, invoking the boy's kingship with his crown name. "This man is your subject. How does Torenthi law deal with high treason?"

Liam walked to Kelson's side, his mouth a thin drawn line as he beheld the man who would steal his throne before he even had the chance to be seated on it. "Drawing and quartering, usually," he replied, "but I think there have been enough limbs torn asunder and blood spilt today for his foolishness. Just hang him."

Kelson started to call Liam on his boyish mercy, tell him that he must not be squeamish and must always deal with traitors harshly, but then he saw the haunted look in the boy's eyes and remembered that Mahael, while traitor, was also Liam's late father's brother. He remembered back to his cousin Conall's execution, and how the family ties had led him to extend the mercy of a prince's execution by the sword instead of the hanging his cousin deserved. He decided it didn't matter which of the two ways execution was brought about; Mahael would be die a traitor's death either way. Kelson turned back to Mahael, whose eyes pierced in hatred.

"Your king has spoken and given sentence. It will be carried out at dawn. Guards, remove him." Mahael was dragged from the tent, struggling and choking over his gag as he tried to scream protest. Sighing, Kelson removed the man from his mind and turned to his boy-king charge.

"Liam," he said kindly, "it has been a passing long day, and you had little sleep last night. Go now, rest, and gather your strength for tomorrow." The boy nodded, eyes numb as he tried not to think about how he had just condemned his own uncle to die. "Aklos," Kelson called. "See that he sleeps soundly."

"Aye," the man bowed, then ushered his king out of Kelson's tent.

When they were gone, Kelson sighed as he reflected on his little lapse with Mahael, and knew his earlier loss of temper would prompt a scolding from Morgan, who had ironically been reminded of the value of his ethical teachings just hours ago. Kelson looked at the duke ruefully. "Alaric, I know what you want to say and I do not wish to hear it right now. Hold it for the morrow," Kelson ordered.

"Pity," the duke muttered. The king started, not expecting this response, and he looked at Morgan to continue. "All the enemies you have faced so far have been honorable in their own way. Mahael was not, and I think his words would drive many men to far worse than a fist in the gut. He will be executed with full cause, justly done by law, despite the outrageous insults that would lead a lesser man to kill him in cold blood. My king, I only wished to express my disappointment that Mahael did not question the honor of my departed lady mother, so I could tender him my greetings as well."

Kelson laughed in astonishment as much as anything else, shaking his head at this unexpected reprieve. "Alaric, I think I like you even better when you are not being my conscience."