

AN HEIR OF TRUTH

by

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PROLOGUE

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Even though Mid-Winter was supposed to be a time of celebration, Iadon Ogilvy thought that the king was taking the spirit of merry-making entirely too far by starting a snowball fight.

The seven members of the royal hunting party were enjoying a brief respite from a morning of hard riding and scarce quarry. It was a cold, sunless day. All around them, the bare trees laden with ice and snow thrust their stark, black limbs towards a sky the color of molten lead. He thought it was a day better suited to sitting before a roaring fire with a cup of spiced wine than in plowing through drifts of new-fallen snow on horseback with nothing to show for it. In any case, they could not really hunt without the hounds. Why had they not brought the hounds?

Iadon drew the hood back from the tangled mane of his hair, more silver than black now but still as thick as that of a much younger man. The wind caressed his throat and the back of his neck with icy fingers. He looked across the clearing and fixed his black-eyed stare on the

twenty-two year-old King Colm, who was out of the saddle and bent over double, laughing soundlessly. Beside him, Euwan Ogilvy – who, being both Iadon’s son and a year older than the king, ought to have known better – was chuckling along with him. When he saw his father’s hawk-like face and disapproving glance, he shrugged and ran a hand through his bright red hair, but the smile remained.

Off to the king’s right, some distance away from the rest of the party, Pain de Burgh, Lord Carlow, brushed packed snow from his wiry brown hair, his smooth cheek and the shoulder of his cloak and answered his friend’s laughter. Then, in a smooth, athletic sweep of motion, he dismounted, stooped to fill his hands with snow and returned Colm’s attack: once, twice. Both shots missed their intended target, but the second sailed past the king and hit the flank of his mare, who whinnied in protest.

Colm placed his hands on his hips and pursed his lips, looking doubtful. He was bare-headed even in the cold. The chill breeze stirred his light brown hair and his royal blue cloak swirled around a lean, muscular frame. “My friend, if you lack the skill to compete then have the grace to withdraw from the contest, instead of assaulting defenseless animals.” He threw back his head and laughed again, the white smoke of his frozen breath wreathing his head. Euwan joined him, this time without looking at Iadon, and jostled the shoulder of his young foster-brother, Darren O’Faolain. He was a handsome young man, with a fair face cut like a diamond into sharp-angled facets and deep-set green eyes which gleamed shrewdly if not intelligently beneath thin black brows and close-cropped black hair. If the king had not already found his favorite in Pain de Burgh, Iadon would have been tempted to keep Darren away from Colm entirely; but as things stood, Iadon limited himself to disapproval of Colm’s bad influence on his ward. Darren traded glances with Euwan and chuckled uneasily, as if sensing that his guardian’s scrutiny had expanded to include him.

Pain was not entirely incompetent and instead of laughing had prepared a demonstration of his skills. A third missile was launched and struck Colm squarely in the chest with enough force – or surprise – to cause him to stumble backwards a step or two. Pain stepped closer and dusted off his gloved hands. He surveyed his handiwork with a satisfied gleam in his green eyes. “I trust that your Grace now finds me a worthy challenger?”

Colm looked up at Pain, down to the snow crushed against the royal arms – black lions on a gold field – blazoned on his surcoat, then back to Pain again, his wide blue eyes astonished. “And a fitting friend,” he replied after a moment. “May the Lady keep me from such worthy

challengers armed with worse than snow. However, friend or no,” he half-turned to Euwan and raised one eyebrow, “such an affront cannot go unanswered. . .”

With that, Colm MacBrus, King of Llyndrothe, and Pain de Burgh joined battle with an intensity equal to any clash of arms. The duel was transformed into a general melee almost immediately, as Euwan entered the fray on the king’s side and Darren sided with Pain. With youthful abandon, each pelted his opponents and, occasionally, his ally with hard-packed snowballs. Their shouts and laughter filling the clearing, while Iadon and the other two members of the hunting party tried to stay out of the lines of fire.

Edmond Lennox, Earl of Abbas Meer and Lord Meath, glanced up from his conversation with Queen Janice. His dark red brows were drawn together in a frown as he watched the snowball fight. Then his pale blue eyes met Iadon’s black ones, sharing his disapproval. It had been a long time since either of them had been so young. With a cluck of his tongue and a tug on his horse’s reins he moved to Iadon’s side.

“One if forced to wonder,” Edmond said in a casual tone which belied his expression, “what, if anything, your sister has taught her husband about propriety and decorum over the years.” At fifty-nine, he was only six years Iadon’s senior, and while his hair retained much of its original russet color, his face was criss-crossed with a network of fine lines which Iadon’s lacked entirely. From afar, Iadon, with his silver hair, appeared the older man; but on closer, second glance Edmond looked almost old enough to be Iadon’s father.

Iadon looked briefly to where his sister Janice sat watching the snowball fight, her face hidden within the ample hood of her royal blue cloak. “It has been some time since my sister has been able to exercise any measure of real control over Colm. She is not, after all, Queen Regent any longer. And he *is* the king.”

The snow-battle broke up into two separate struggles. Colm had somehow managed to make an armful of snowballs for himself and was firing them off in rapid succession at Pain, who dodged most of them ineffectually while trying to form his own weapons. Euwan and his foster-brother Darren were more evenly matched at the moment; neither of them would have posed much of a threat to the king.

“True, no one controls him these days.” Edmond squinted at the four young men in the snow and the lines around his mouth deepened. “You know as well as I how little heed he pays

to any advice. The council's, yours. Mine." So spoke the Lord High Constable of Llyndrothe, with whom lay the responsibility of safe-guarding the king's person and properties. "He learned that from Janice." His tone obliquely implied a fault on Iadon's part.

Iadon, Duke of Vanavar, Warden of the Vanavar March and the king's Lord Marshal, was arguably the most powerful man in Llyndrothe save for the king himself. If anyone had reason to be affronted by King Colm's wilfulness, it was he. He turned to the other man. "And she learned the skill of listening and not hearing from me." Had Iadon been the kind of man who smiled readily, he might have done so now.

"Don't mistake me – I have the greatest respect for your sister. But what she learned from you, she has taught the king all too well."

"She is not the only one who has taught the king a thing or two."

Colm gave a shout of surprise. Both men turned to look. Pain had abandoned snow as a weapon and charged directly at the king instead. Colm pounded his friend with the last of his snowballs. Unhampered by the assault, Pain tackled him and wrestled him to the ground. He had the slight advantage of size and the greater one of surprise, and he stayed on top, laughing all the while, as Colm struggled against the strong arms and legs pinning his limbs in the snow. After a minute, Colm gained some leverage and flipped Pain. The two men rolled over and over together in the snow, cloaks twining around their interlocked bodies. Eventually Pain found himself flat against the ground, held there not just by hands and knees but by the full length of Colm's body deliberately pressed against his. Colm stared down into his eyes, then brushed his cheek against Pain's as he bent his head towards Pain's ear. Pain tilted his head back slightly and closed his eyes. For a moment the snowball fight was entirely forgotten.

Edmond reddened but did not tear his eyes away from the scene before them. "Of course I realize," he said, as if answering some unspoken question, "that the king needs friends, companions –"

"I would have said 'favorites'," Iadon interjected.

"– just like any other man." A muscle twitched along his jawline. "However, this sort of display is totally unacceptable."

The display ended as Colm rose and helped Pain to his feet. Evidently some sort of treachery had been arranged while they were on the ground, for now they began pelting Euwan and Darren with snowballs. One of Pain's found its mark on Darren's forehead. Darren exclaimed loudly at this foul play, wiping snow and damp black hair from his face. Quickly the erstwhile allies of the king and his favorite set aside their own quarrel and banded together in mutual defense.

"Completely," Iadon agreed. "Darren has been my ward for more than half of his nineteen years; I hoped to have been a better influence on him than this. At the very least, I had expected that the negotiations for his marriage which we begun at the New Year would instill him with a greater sense of maturity. My son is already a lost cause." However, he did note privately and with some pride how well Euwan was faring against Colm in this round of hostilities.

"That is not what I meant." Edmond was no longer as red in the face as before, but he sounded more irritated.

"I know what you meant," Iadon rejoined. He turned to face the other man fully and spoke in a low voice. "I do not approve of the closeness between Pain de Burgh and the king, either. Pain is entirely too much in the king's confidence and I do not like the influence he has come to exercise in such a short time. As for the rest . . . I care more about who bends Colm's ear and less about who shares his bed."

Edmond grunted. "Is that so? I would imagine your sister has a different view on the matter, beyond the consideration that whoever shares his bed is most likely to bend his ear as well. Perhaps she has resigned herself to being childless. How many years has it been since she was even pregnant?" He flashed Iadon a malicious grin.

"It was long before Pain came along, as you well know." It was an old and unending debate between them.

"But thanks to Pain, at least now we know why Colm and Janice have been married for seven and a half years without producing an heir." Edmond's grin faded and was replaced by a less savory expression. "I grant you, Colm was not greatly interested in the process which leads to fatherhood even before his . . . friendship with Pain. But at least on a few occasions he did what royal duty demanded of him. Now that he has Pain, he neglects his duty altogether. There

was a time, not so long ago, when I could have said as much to the king and queen and they would have listened. I care who shares Colm's bed. And so should you."

Iadon shrugged off Edmond's suggestion. "Perhaps. And one would suppose that my sister, the mortified wife herself, ought to be even more concerned, until you remember that the royal family suffers from no lack of heirs, myself and Janice among them. When you look at it that way, it does not matter so much that Colm has no children."

Edmond turned to look at him sharply. "Your argument has a certain logic to it, but I doubt that you mean it. At present your uncle, Prince Mark, is heir to the crown while your own place in the succession is rather remote, Janice's even more so. You would both enjoy much stronger positions as the uncle and mother of the next king than as mere cousins."

"You seemed to have thought about this a great deal, my lord." He sounded almost amused and Edmond stirred in his saddle, suddenly uncomfortable. "True, there is no love lost between myself and my uncle Mark. For my own sake, I would much prefer that Colm produced his own heirs, but it is a matter in which I have little say and even less control. When Janice makes no effort to curb Pain's influence and keep him in his proper place, what hope have I of persuading the king differently?" A snowball flew by his ear, narrowly missing him but stinging his face with icy sprinkles. Iadon turned to find the king smiling at him from across the clearing. He returned the smile stiffly. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Janice move. Her profile had emerged briefly from her hood as she followed the snowball's course, but she drew back quickly, once again invisible. Colm nodded to her knowingly and flashed an affectionate, unabashed grin. She answered merely by lifting her hand, but somehow this small gesture conveyed an equal measure of affection and mutual understanding.

"It is not necessarily a matter of persuasion." Edmond looked down at his gloved hands and waited a moment before continuing. "We may not agree on much, my lord, whether in or out of council, but in this matter I think we are of one mind: something has to be done."

"Something has to be done about what, cousin?" Queen Janice asked, coming up behind him. She had drawn the hood back from the perfect oval of her face and was regarding Edmond unblinkingly with eyes the color of the leaden sky. The red curves of her bow mouth were relaxed and equally expressionless. Wheat-gold hair, streaked with lighter and darker highlights, was tightly braided and coiled at the base of her neck. She was ten years older than her husband, twenty-one years younger than her brother, and as agelessly beautiful as the statue of a goddess.

Edmond did not so much as flinch. “My lord your brother and I were just wondering how much longer we are going to have to wait before continuing the hunt.”

“It might be better if we just went back to Huntinggrave,” Iadon suggested. “We’re not going to make a success of the day without hounds.”

Janice nodded agreement. “Our young men are going to be soaked and chilled to the bone at this rate. I would not want to have to tell Darren’s prospective bride or his mother that he became deathly ill while in our company. Nor would I want my husband to fall ill.” She gave her brother an opaque look. Iadon wondered if she had somehow overheard his conversation with Edmond.

“The king is in good hands, Madam,” Edmond replied viciously.

Iadon could have knocked him out of the saddle. “Shall we intervene and call a truce, Janice?”

Already they had missed their chance to do both. Darren and Euwan had ended their duel and were brushing snow from their clothes, laughing together. Pain, however, had filled a fold of his cloak with snowballs and was mounting up. Colm, guessing at his intention, leapt into the saddle and galloped off, leaving a fine mist of snow in his wake. Pain followed.

“May the gods help us,” Iadon exclaimed. “Come on!” Without glancing at his companions, he wheeled his mount around and took off after the king and his favorite.

A different kind of hunt was on now, and the king was the quarry. He was already a good fifty yards ahead of Pain. He glanced over his shoulder occasionally as he led the chase through the woods, threading his way among the closely growing trees and low, bare branches with precise control. Pain was rapidly closing the gap. He sat high in the saddle, poised to strike when he gauged himself to be within range.

Iadon was not so far behind Pain but had no idea what, exactly, he intended to do once he caught up to him. He muttered several curses about the folly of young, high-born, high-spirited, loose-living. . . he stopped himself. He looked back only once. Euwan and Darren were behind him, with Edmond and Janice bringing up the distant rear. Euwan shouted something to him

about water. Iadon turned his attention ahead of him again, puzzled, unable to make out his son's words. But when Colm veered off to the right, plunging downhill, suddenly Iadon understood: there was a stream below and they were heading for it.

Colm had miscalculated in turning downhill. He had to slow his pace, bringing himself within range of Pain, and the maneuver gave Pain the added advantage of the higher ground. Pain lobbed two snowballs at the king and they easily found their target in Colm's back. Then Colm gained the level ground at the bottom of the hill, a narrow, treeless bank beside an ice-covered stream, and resumed his original pace, keeping the stream on his right.

Iadon reached the bank of the stream directly behind Pain. "Wait," he shouted. "That's enough. I've had just about enough."

Pain reined in momentarily and turned his square, fine-boned features and green eyes on Iadon. His wiry brown hair was frosted with snow and he looked older than his twenty-four years. "Then go home and rest, my lord." He spurred his mount and raced after Colm.

"Of all the impudent –" Iadon muttered, and followed, two lengths behind him.

Pain caught up to Colm more quickly this time. The stream, its water pulsing beneath the ice, wound through the woods in long loops and tight bends, so that instead of being directly ahead Colm was more often somewhat to Pain's left or right, and always drawing closer. A snowball struck Colm in the back of the head. The trail took a sharp left-hand bend and Colm disappeared momentarily. When Pain, and Iadon, rounded the bend and caught sight of him again, he had turned in the saddle. He was grinning at Pain, who was preparing to launch another snowball. Then Pain's uplifted arm dropped, and he shouted an alarm: above the frozen rapids, the trail ahead ended abruptly in an impenetrable stand of trees. And Colm, still looking back at them, was heading right for them.

Even had Colm understood Pain's shouted words, the warning came too late. Left to her own direction, the king's mare skidded to an uncontrolled halt a few feet from the trees. But the rocky ground concealed beneath the blanket of snow and ice offered her little footing and she slid towards the bank of the stream, hooves scrabbling uselessly, then stumbled and fell sideways. Colm fought for control but when she rolled, he was thrown from the saddle. He fell on a half-submerged jumble of rocks in the stream, cracking the veneer of grey ice, and lay horribly still in three feet of black water.

Pain managed a more controlled stop. By the time Iadon joined him, Pain had lowered himself over the bank and was balanced carefully among the rocks. He was up to his mid-calves in fragmented ice and water. He looked up at Iadon, panic in his green eyes. “He’s unconscious, I think he hit his head against the rocks, we’ve got to get him out, help me. . .” His gloved hands fumbled for Colm’s shoulders in the water foaming up from under the ice.

Iadon noted how Colm’s limp form was held in this spot by only the slick stones behind his head and neck. “Wait!” This time Pain obeyed Iadon’s command. “If you’re not careful you’ll only push him in farther.” He crawled over the bank and positioned himself, knee-deep in the stream, beside the king. The edge of the ice pressed against the back of his legs and he felt his feet in their fur-lined boots going numb. Bracing himself, he thrust his arms into the icy water. He hooked one under Colm’s submerged knees, the other around his waist, and lifted. “Grab his arms,” he said to Pain.

By then, Euwan and Darren were on the bank. Between the four of them they got Colm out of the water and onto a cloak – Darren’s – which had been spread on the ground. Quickly, Iadon stripped the king to his sodden tunic and rolled him in his own cloak. He looked up into his son’s blue eyes; wordlessly, Euwan removed his cloak and draped it around his father’s shoulders. He suddenly felt very cold.

Edmond and Janice were there now. “Gods above,” Edmond exclaimed, his voice unnaturally shrill, “what happened?”

“The king lost control of his horse and was thrown into the water.” He glanced up to where the king’s mare still lay on her side, floundering in the snow. Her legs were probably broken. He returned his attention to the king. Colm’s damp skin was patched grey with frostbite, his lips blue. Iadon leaned over him and gently probed the back of his head. Janice came to stand beside her brother. She stared down on him and the lifeless form of her husband without seeming to see. Pain had backed away and was crouched at the edge of the grove, watching the proceedings with a glazed look.

“Is he . . . ?” Edmond had gone quite grey himself.

“No.” Iadon stood and faced his sister. She met his gaze calmly, steadily. “He lives, and he is breathing. He seems to have hit his head on the rocks but there is no blood. He may have

broken bones. The greatest danger is the cold. We have to get him back to Huntinggrave, now. I will carry him.”

“You’re drenched,” Edmond countered. “I’ll carry him.”

Iadon nodded. “Very well.”

“I – “ Janice stopped and laid a hand on Edmond’s arm. “Of course. Thank you.”

Iadon drew his dagger and went to put the mare out of her misery. Edmond mounted and Euwan lifted the cloak-shrouded Colm into his arms while Darren looked on, shivering. Pain came forward. His lower lip trembled and tears streamed from his eyes and froze on his cheeks. “Madam,” he said to Janice, “I’m sorry. This is all my fault, I shouldn’t have – I would never want to. . .” He stifled a sob.

She regarded him for a moment, neither reproach nor sympathy in her face. Then she touched his shoulder and shook her head. “I know,” she said in a gentle voice. “Later.”

He nodded mutely. Iadon came back, wiping blood from his knife on his surcoat. His teeth chattered noisily.

Janice led them, five silent men on horseback, one bearing a sixth in his arms, back the way they had come, to Huntinggrave.