

EXCERPT - *Curse of the Healer* by Ashley York

“Ye should have taken a strap to him,” he said.

Her breath caught at the very idea. Unheard of! Certainly he could not mean such a thing.

“He is like every other lad his age. Inquisitive.”

The warrior’s expression did not change.

She swallowed down her fear and used her most commanding tone. “Ye’re on Meic Lochlainn land.”

The man continued toward her, looming over her. “And well I know it.”

“Mayhap ye need to seek the *rí túath*’s permission to be here.”

“Mayhap I have the overking’s permission.”

The Meic Lochlainn had attained overking status, with several lesser kings under him. These men, the *ríg túaithe*, were from the direct line of former kings, had proven themselves in battle, and had been properly anointed. This man could be one of the visiting *ríg túaithe*, but Aednat sensed he was not.

She scoffed. “I do not believe ye.”

He stopped close enough for her to see the tiny lines at the corners of his bright blue eyes and the quirk of his heavy brow before he asked, “And why would ye not believe what I say to ye?”

“I do not know ye.” Arrogant! “And who are ye to say what the lad’s punishment should be?”

He had long, dark hair. Taller than most, he was probably seldom overlooked, and she had a notion his will was rarely denied. His broad shoulders and warrior’s stance were, no doubt, quite frightening... to some. Then he crossed his arms about his broad chest, tucking a hand under the intricately carved silver band clasping his bare upper arm. A wealthy man, then. Perhaps he was a *rí túaithe*.

“Mayhap ye do not recognize me, but ye should heed my warning.”

Any king could order that a little boy be punished with a strip of leather, if he were cruel enough, but it was not an accepted practice. Her grandfather had been a cruel *rí*. She’d witnessed one lad, Will, barely older than Lorccán, having his fingers sliced right off his hand for stealing food. Aodh Meic Lochlainn had thought it better that the boy starve to death than steal. Will had become her friend—a fellow outcast in the woods.

The stranger’s eyes narrowed and she nibbled her lower lip. She couldn’t back down now. “Well, then, ’tis a good thing ye do not get to decide.”

He closed the remaining distance between them in three strides, his face etched in angry lines. She instinctively backed away, half expecting him to grab her arm.

“Ye’re a lousy mother... or nurse maid... or shepherdess... or whatever ye are, if ye think ’tis all well and good for a child to put himself in harm’s way as long as he lives to tell the tale.”

She recoiled at the insult. Although she was well past marrying age at two and twenty, she was no one’s mother and never would be. With her limp, there would never be a husband or

family. Too many fears of children with the same malady. Shepherdess? Did she still bear a resemblance to the folk who lived apart from the villagers? But he hadn't finished his tirade.

"He must be taught to heed the warnings he's been given if he's to survive and become a man."

The words stung, thrown at her like a venomous curse. She cared for Lorccán as if he were her own and would never do anything to hurt him. Squaring her shoulders, she refused to show her inner turmoil.

"The lad learned his lesson." She spat the words right back at him.

"Ye said yerself he'd be doing it again." Despite the even keel of his voice, his increasing anger was unmistakable. "Or am I so old and feeble that my hearing is failing me?"

Staring in the face of his obvious vitality and strength, she hesitated. A finer specimen of a well-honed man she'd not seen. "I do not really believe—"

"NO?" A sheer wall of exasperation now, he waited. His square jaw tensed beneath the shadow of dark stubble. "Mayhap the next time ye'll find his young body impaled on a rock at the bottom of the cliff."

The menacing declaration, delivered in a low, controlled manner, made her gasp. The image flashing through her mind caused it to reel. She slapped the man's face so hard, his beard burned the palm of her hand.

Aednat froze, horrified at her own reaction. Striking a man was no small offense, and if this man was a *rí*, the consequences would be serious. His eyes widened right before he caught her arm and yanked her close. Her breath caught, though his grip was not overly firm. They stood that way for a long moment—his head lowered to hers so they stood nose to nose, his broad chest brushing against her forearm in time with his heavy breathing.

His gaze dropped, to slowly follow up her length before settling again on her face.

That he continued to study her kept her fully watchful. His features relaxed, but she sensed mounting tension in him. The many possibilities of what he might be thinking flitted through her mind like little mice avoiding a hungry hawk. Outrage. Indignation. Superiority.

"I forego the fine I have every right to demand for yer action. Instead, I demand a kiss."

He delivered the words as a man in authority. And he did not look away.

A kiss? Heat poured off him, but it was no longer anger riding him. She forced down the lump in her throat, holding his intense gaze as her thoughts raced. She had never been kissed by a man. Or kissed a man, but it was not a high price to pay to dismiss the entire incident.

Refusing would certainly result in a steeper demand, and the last thing she wanted to do was to cause any problems for her *rí túath* and cousin. Sean acted as her father, so any honor price demanded or paid could be half *his* worth. A king held no special power outside his own *túath*, but at a gathering this size, ruffling any fine feathers was to be avoided.

Aednat glanced at the warrior's lips. His eyes brightened, and she struggled to breath evenly as she held his gaze, anticipation making a mockery of her show of bravery. She wetted her lips, and his long nose flared ever so slightly.

"Aednat!" The sound of Sean's voice had her exhaling in relief. Her reprieve.

One dark brow quirked as if to question her thought.

“Here,” she answered, irritated that she sounded desperate.

“A timely interruption.” The warrior spoke in a quiet voice, his teeth white against the thick brown beard when he smiled. A satisfied smile. “But I’m a patient man.”

She should have slapped him harder.

With Sean close, her bravery doubled. In truth since he took her in and fostered her, he was more like a father. *Datan*. And he would certainly protect her as she deserved. She shoved past the man before she lost her nerve, her jerky gait nearly causing her to bump into him. “I am here, Sean!”

She made it to the edge of the forest just as Sean burst through on his mount. His men, including those sent to protect her, were in close proximity as if they’d remained nearby all along.

“What d’ye here, little one?” Sean’s intent gaze soothed her, reminding her she did have protection. “Aednat, ye’re soaked right through.”

Taking in her own soggy condition, she nibbled on her lower lip. She probably did look like a shepherdess. Heat rose in her face, but she kept her back to the stranger. “I—”

“Diarmuid!” Sean finally noticed the man behind her, but rather than come to her defense and question the brute’s intentions, he burst into a huge grin and jumped from his horse in one leap.

Diarmuid? This was the *rí túaithe* who ate small children? She believed it!

“Sean!” Diarmuid said.

For the first time since she’d met this Diarmuid, his voice sounded... pleasant. When she turned around, she could not believe her eyes. The warrior’s relaxed expression and wide smile mirrored her cousin’s. His countenance was so transformed, he might even be considered handsome by lasses who favored the overbearing warrior type.

Sean and Diarmuid embraced, pounding each other on the back before separating.

“When did ye arrive?” Sean asked.

Aednat wished to be anywhere but here. She remained still, hoping not to call attention to herself.

“This day. Did ye not come across my men?” Diarmuid asked, looking beyond Sean.

He scanned the forest before his eyes came to rest on her.

*Damn.*

She refused to respond to his questioning glance. Diarmuid put two fingers to his mouth and whistled, a high piercing sound that made her jump. Sean turned toward the forest as well, an expectant expression on his face.

Ten mounted men appeared, well-armed with battle axes, shields and spears. Their horses were huge, covered with animal hides. A rider-less black destrier trotted past them, making a direct line to Diarmuid, who caught up the horse’s reins and immediately raked his hand along its muzzle, whispering something unintelligible.

The lead man, a broad, black-haired warrior, called out, “A *thighearna*, is aught amiss?”

Diarmuid raised his head but continued to stroke his horse, his large hand moving down the length of the great beast, stopping to rub its flank. "All is well, Marcán."

The warriors in either group eyed the other with suspicion. They looked to be equally matched in both number and size.

"Were ye able to track them down?" Marcán asked.

"We were not," Diarmuid said. "No sign of them."

"Did ye have some trouble?" Sean's concern came through in his tone.

"On the way north, we came upon a small village that had been attacked by some thieving bastards," Diarmuid said. "We had hoped to track them down."

"Are *these* the men we've come to meet?" Marcán asked.

"The same, Marcán. Be easy." The horse lifted its muzzle, its eyes closing in appreciation at its master's attentive caresses. Diarmuid turned back to Sean. "Did ye come across a young lad by any chance?"

Aednat's breath caught. Was he going to tell on her? Her face could not get any hotter.

"Lorccán?" Sean said. "He told me he'd tumbled in some spiny bushes."

Aednat had not expected the boy to confess his mischief to his own father.

"Blackthorns." Diarmuid scowled. "The boy had been on the cliffs. After the wild eggs."

Sean's nostrils flared, a sure sign of irritation. "My thanks for telling me. I wish I'd caught him myself."

"This lass *did* catch him."

Both sets of eyes suddenly on her, she found her breath trapped again.