

The KING's CHAMPION

*Book Two of the
Chronicles of
Ilseador*



KERRIDWEN MANGALA MCNAMARA
AUTHOR OF A NOT-SO-SACRIFICIAL MAIDEN



*Sir Jason Solway, King's Champion,
has served as Genevieve's bodyguard these five years
since her husband's coronation.*

*A childhood friend,
he has watched her decline with his own heart breaking,
carrying her fainting form away from the negotiating table as
she lost each much-wanted babe... each desperately needed
potential Heir.*

*He may be able to solve their troubles... but doing so may
break him, for all that he loves his monarchs well.*

*

*Sir Adam Loveress, Captain of the Royal Guard, fiancé to
Jason, and closest friend to Damien, has his own secrets that
will bind their bleeding hearts... or tear them to shreds.*

*

*Time is running out.
Queen Genevieve's declining health may drag her beloved,
soul-bonded husband into death with her.*

*The nobles are restive.
And there is something deeply suspicious about Queen
Genevieve's attempted negotiations to restore the Lost
Province of Elendria...*



*THE
KING'S CHAMPION*

*Book Two of the
Chronicles of Ilseador*



KERRIDWEN MANGALA MCNAMARA

KERRIDWEN MANGALA MCNAMARA

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, places or people, living or dead, is coincidental.

Also available in eBook and hardcover editions.

McNamara, Kerridwen Mangala

The King's Champion / by Kerridwen Mangala McNamara Indiana:
Rising Dragon Books, 2023

(McNamara, Kerridwen Mangala. Chronicles of Ilseador; bk. 1)

Summary: Sir Jason Solway, the King's Champion, is the only hope to save the Realm and his king and queen, according to prophecy... but not in any way he ever imagined.

ISBN 978-1-960160-23-2 (pbk)

1. Kings and rulers - Fiction. 2. Rebels and Romance - Fiction

ISBN 978-1-960160-24-9 (hc); ISBN 978-1-960160-22-5 (eBook)

The King's Champion: Book Two of the Chronicles of Ilseador

Copyright © 2023 by Kerridwen Mangala McNamara

Cover art and illustrations by the author

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any format, print or electronic, without permission in writing from the copyright holders.

For further information, email RisingDragonBooks@gmail.com

ISBN: 978-1-960160-23-2

First Print Edition: December 2023

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A note to sensitive souls:

Ilseador is a land that has been misruled for eighty-three years by a tyrant who was also an evil sorcerer in every sense of the word. Up to four generations cannot remember a time before the old king assumed the throne... and the morals (or lack thereof) of a country often develop - intentionally or not - from the example at the top. This is particularly true of the upper echelons of society, which this story focuses on. The result is that it's basically an entire nation of traumatized people who have seen that greed and cruelty and o'erweening ambition are rewarded. The old king's Apprentice is still around to cause trouble as well...

Five years into King Damien's more compassionate reign, there are still far too many scars...

Proceed with caution...

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
Shocked1

CHAPTER TWO
Unhappy

CHAPTER THREE
Restless

CHAPTER FOUR
Surprises

CHAPTER FIVE
Fantasies

CHAPTER SIX
Misunderstandings

CHAPTER SEVEN
Secrets

CHAPTER EIGHT
Confidences

CHAPTER NINE
A Tangled Web

CHAPTER TEN
Bound

CHAPTER ELEVEN
Solutions

CHAPTER TWELVE	
<i>Proposal</i>	.....
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	
<i>Dark Distractions</i>	.....
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	
<i>Relations</i>	.....
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	
<i>Stresses</i>	.....
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	
<i>Sustenance</i>	.....
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	
<i>Answers</i>	.....
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	
<i>Change</i>	.....
CHAPTER NINETEEN	
<i>Revelations</i>	.....
CHAPTER TWENTY	
<i>More Revelations</i>	.....
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE	
<i>Ceremony</i>	.....
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO	
<i>Resolution</i>	.....
EXTRAS	
<i>Family Trees</i>	.....
<i>Maps</i>	.....
<i>Index of Characters</i>	.....
<i>Author's Note, Also by, About the Author</i>	.....

Chapter ONE

Shocked

THE FIREWORKS HAD ENDED, BUT the drinking would go on all night in some of the city's taverns. Perhaps all over the Realm, for all Jason knew.

Five years – not of peace, for although the Rebels had negotiated an amnesty on the grounds that they hadn't been rebelling against the Realm but against a depraved king, it had taken war to retrieve the Lost Provinces.

Five years – since Damien had been crowned king. A triumph for Jason, Adam and Ciriis... and the people they had recruited to help him reach his throne.

Five years – nearly – since he and Genevieve had retaken the castle, deposed her usurping ex-husband, and defeated Lord Prydeen. All without the help of his Champion or his Royal Guard.

Five years – since the people had begun calling Damien the 'Sorcerer-King'... but with pride and faith in his sorcery.

"They're waiting for us," Adam prodded Jason out of his memories, recalling the tall King's Champion to the present. They were standing on the castle wall where they'd had – not the best possible view of the fireworks, perhaps, but a restful one. Others had had the task of being on guard this evening, allowing Jason and Adam a rare moment of peace and togetherness.

Rosa was home with her husband and her newest babe in Zialest.

Ciriis was in Elaarwen, tending to the ailing Duke Aldred in Genevieve's place, since the Queen's presence was required in the capitol for the festivities and her father hadn't felt up to making the trip.

Damien and Genevieve had invited their Champion and the Captain of their Royal Guard up to the royal suite for a private celebration of how far they had come.

So, it would just be the four of them. His two dearest friends and his beloved Adam. Peaceful.

Jason smiled and followed his love, remembering the day that Ciriis and Adam had told him about the nervous young prince hiding in the Royal Library. The other two had been observing Damien for some time and had come to the conclusion that he was the one they had been looking for: the legitimate Heir that they could *protect* from the depravity of King Reginald and his Court... that they could prepare to be a worthy king.

But Damien had been hiding away in the Library for five years, ever since his parents had been killed. He had come out only when the Royal Librarian – Damien's guardian-by-default – Lady Theresa, forced him to attend 'family dinners' so his grandfather, King Reginald the Ruthless, could observe him.

Lady Theresa. Jason nearly snorted as he followed Adam up the long, spiral stair. There had always been something cold about her, he had felt, even then. But in those days, none of the people assembling to protect the young prince had known that Damien's older sister, Princess Kandra, had planned to marry Lady Theresa's son, Raphael of Cedarwen. Nor had they known that Kandra and her father, Crown Prince Eric, had planned to defect to the Rebellion via Cedarwen following the marriage, taking her mother and Damien along with them. All of which plans had come to naught when the princess was fatally thrown from her horse; her parents had accused the King – Prince Eric's father – of engineering their daughter's death, and had been cut down in the throneroom themselves for their troubles. In front of the entire Court, including a pair of shocked young squires named Jason and Adam... and including their ten-year-old son, Prince Damien. Who had fled into the safest space he knew: the Royal Library.

Baron and Baroness Anvliyar, and young Lord Raphael, had been at Court as well. The Baron was executed forthwith for complicity in Prince Eric's treason. Young Lord Raphael had seemed half out of his mind with grief; his mother, the now-dowager baroness, had literally thrown herself at the King's feet and sworn that neither she nor her son had been made aware of the plan. That it had been hatched solely between her husband and Prince Eric.

Whether that was true, it was impossible to say. Not even King Reginald – feared for his foul sorcery – nor his evil apprentice, Lord Prydeen, had possessed the ability to read in men's minds what was not spoken aloud.

Nor yet in women's, or so it was whispered.

And the King – for reasons that Damien's later partisans learned only too late and to their ultimate sorrow – was inclined to grant clemency. He named young Raphael as Baron of Cedarwen in his father's place, and took his oath as vassal. But King Reginald retained the mother at Court as his Royal Librarian.

There had been no reason to suspect Lady Theresa of being anything other than yet another grieving hostage widow. No reason to suspect she carried an axe to grind against Princess Kandra's long-orphaned younger brother, Damien.

It had been Jason's task to approach the boy. Adam and Ciriis knew quite well that *they* didn't have the patience for it. And it had taken Jason two months of a ubiquitous presence in the Royal Library just to seem innocuous enough that Damien had come out of hiding in his presence. *Another* month before he'd dared speak to the boy, ragged, scrawny princeling that he was. A *full year* before Damien had trusted him enough to leave the Library on occasion at Jason's side.

The lad had taken to riding easily, connecting seemingly instantly with any horse he was introduced to. But it had taken an entire *second* year before Jason had managed to get Damien to so much as take a sword in his hand; the boy had been all too aware that showing any talent or skill that might appear threatening to his grandfather's throne – or his apprentice's place – was a recipe for becoming the victim of a mysterious 'accident'... no matter how carefully he was watched and guarded.

Truth be told, Jason had needed that peaceful, quiet time himself. Luring Damien out of his self-imposed semi-captivity had been healing for him as well, after the years he had spent as Prince Oskar's bodyguard and Champion. The prince had become the younger brother he had never had, trusting Jason as no one – not even Adam – ever had and they had settled into a peaceful pattern.

And that was when Prince Oskar had begun to notice Damien... Jason's thoughts shied automatically away from *that* period as, in the here and now, Adam knocked on the door to the royal suite.

The Royal Guards on duty here were younger men, ones who had been recruited since the coronation year. Jason knew them well, of course – he wouldn't have permitted anyone so close to his king and queen that he did not know well, indeed – but as their captain, Adam knew them better. Genevieve had been pressing to add women to the formally known Guards, and men to the secret cadre; they had been more successful with the latter initiative, as the Royal Guards were one and all belted knights and a woman had yet to meet that standard. Several were close, but the eighty-three years during which King Reginald had refused to award women their shields had taken its toll.

Damien himself let them in, still in his finery from the day's festivities. He clasped Adam on the arm, but shyly accepted a hug from Jason. He'd lost some of the diffidence that had worried them all when he was first crowned; now it showed up mostly when it was just him and his original Inner Circle. The small, neat beard he'd begun to affect a few years ago didn't do a great deal to make him look older to Jason's eye.

Genevieve wasn't in her usual place, and she didn't come forward to greet them besides a brief acknowledging nod.

She was on the far side of the sitting room, leaning pensively against a wall, also still in her flowing, turquoise gown. A particularly extravagant confection of gauzy silk over satin that suited her blue-green eyes and red-gold hair, but that Jason knew she hated from the moment he'd seen her in it. It accentuated her too-slender waist, and his heart tightened, remembering each of the times he'd had to carry her unconscious out of negotiations for the Lost Provinces after yet another miscarriage that followed too soon on the last one.

He knew she was getting desperate to produce Heirs for the Realm and for Elaarwen, but it broke his heart to see her nearly killing herself to try, over and over... and never giving herself time to recover, never pausing in her work on the battlefield or in the negotiating tent.

Not that they had much choice. Damien was best suited to the work of rebuilding the Realm and the nobility from the depravity of his grandfather's reign. Genevieve was the warrior. And... the rulers of the Lost Provinces – and the monarchs of the kingdoms that had all too eagerly accepted them as their own territories – would not negotiate with the ‘Sorcerer-King.’

And there was no real Heir to the Realm save Genevieve herself... not that *she* was suited to the position, given that she was soul-bonded to her husband: if Damien should die for any reason, Genevieve would shortly follow. Damien had scoured the Realm, placing the Monarch's Sword into the hands of anyone even suspected of having Alsterling blood – and a great many of his nobles of other Houses as well – in hopes of finding another Heir acceptable to the Sword. But the damned Blade hadn't so much as twinkled, let alone let loose with the coruscating display of lights it gave off when Damien unsheathed it to prove his own worthiness for the throne. Nor the only slightly lesser show it put on for his queen.

Jason looked at her sadly. She was leaning against the cold stone wall, one hand gripping the elbow of her other arm, her eyes turned aside from all of them. Had she been arguing with Damien before he and Adam entered? Surely, she couldn't be *that* angry with her husband about his insistence that she halt negotiations for the reacquisition of Elendria and return for these festivities. If she was, Jason would have to say something to put matters right between the pair of them; he'd been close to insisting on the same thing himself, given how ill and frail she had become.

“I'm glad you could come. We *both* are,” Damien said, glancing at Genevieve with an... odd expression. Unhappiness, certainly. Jason resolved to say something as soon as he could work it into the conversation. Let the Queen be angry at *him*.

Adam executed an absurdly florid bow. “What else, when our liege-lord summons us?” He grinned and clapped the young King on the back. “Too bad Rosa and Ciriis aren't here to mark the day with

us, but we wouldn't leave the two of you lovebirds *lonely* up here on this tower you refuse to leave..."

The tower suite had been chosen for Damien by Adam himself – and Ciriis, the erstwhile spymistress and Adam's co-conspirator in placing Damien on the throne. It was the most securable location in the entirety of Castle Alsterling, having no windows save the skylights that formed part of the cone at the top of the high tower, and with no easy angle to lob arrows or other missiles into the then-prince's living space. A castle improvement project of King Reginald's from the early, still-hopeful, days of his reign had led to even such remote locations having been plumbed for running water – though some of the interior plumbing lower down hadn't been completed until earlier this year – and this suite had originally been designed for Reginald's eldest son, Prince Robert. Supposedly it had also been used to confine Queen Rena – Damien's grandmother – and her son, the young Prince Eric, when King Reginald had managed to have his runaway wife returned to him from her native Dawil.

There were matching suites in several of the other towers – perhaps once intended for other royal offspring – but the others had already been in use when King Reginald had named Damien the Heir and it had finally been feasible for Adam and Ciriis to make sure he ended up in secure rooms.

The reasons for needing that security had changed, five years into Damien's own reign, but not the risk itself.

The prince had immediately discovered a magickal secret passageway leading down from these rooms... though he had taken some five years to share the discovery with anyone else – and then it was only with Genevieve, who had kidnapped him willingly off to a romantic getaway. His reticence had made Jason worry that they had given Damien cause not to trust them, and Ciriis had been beside herself with irritation over the exclusion. But Adam had simply nodded and told the younger man that he'd been clever to have an escape that not even his Inner Circle could betray inadvertently or even under torture.

And, of course, that secret passageway had enabled all of them – and the entire Royal Guard – to escape the castle during the thankfully brief Usurpation by Harold of Siovale.

As well as to allow Damien and Genevieve to sneak *back* into the castle – against all rational advice and without either Champion or Guards. That they'd been successful in overturning the coup, rescuing their remaining people, and defeating King Reginald's apprentice was almost irrelevant to Jason. Both he and Adam had nearly had heart attacks when they realized that the royal pair had snuck off into the night – and *Ciriis* had gone into *hysterics*. They'd all but raised Damien, after all, and Genevieve had been a childhood friend of Jason's.

It had all turned out well in the end...

But keeping the King and Queen's quarters in the tower had seemed only sensible after that. That passage was far too valuable not to keep it accessible to those most likely to need it.

Damien gave his Captain the usual amiable smile. "You know why."

"And it's not like we *need* more space," Genevieve commented without looking at anyone. "Not for just the two of us. Unlike *Rosa* and *Zachary*."

She cut herself off, but Jason exchanged a speaking look with Adam as he silently cursed himself for acceding to her wish to stop for a few nights in Zialest to admire Rosa's newborn second daughter. Even if it *had* been directly on the way back from Elendria. Genevieve had still been sick enough from the latest miscarriage that Jason could have overruled his queen and insisted on not taking the extra time on the return trip; she always recovered better in Damien's presence, likely because of their soul-bond, so there was even a justification besides sparing her the emotional strain.

Damien had gone to the wall and was gently prying her away from it, whispering something in her ear. She shook her head, but came forward without resistance. Almost, Jason thought uneasily, as if she no longer possessed the strength to resist.

The young King guided her to her usual place on the couch, and seated himself as well, waving the other two men to the second couch that had been acquired not long after they had deposed the usurper. It had been added so that Adam and Jason could sit together, once they no longer needed to hide their relationship for fear of King Reginald or Lord Prydeen using it against them... and thereby turning them

against Damien. Jason knew that Rosa and Zachary sat here when they visited the capitol, and that Genevieve's father, Duke Aldred, would lie down on it when he was in town. But it had been added for his and Adam's primary benefit; another token of respect and love from their young sovereign.

"A toast?" Adam suggested, pouring out into the crystal goblets already placed on the low table where they had made so many plans. "To old friends."

"To many more joyous gatherings like this one," Damien answered, tapping his glass against Adam's.

"To peace," Genevieve responded in almost a normal tone.

"To ten years since Damien finally learned how to use a sword as more than a bludgeon," Jason added, intending to bring some humor to the moment.

He was completely startled – and baffled – when Genevieve leaped to her feet and fled back to her position on the wall with an anguished cry.

Genevieve, who had never fled from *anything* for as long as Jason could remember.

"Genny, what's wrong?" he asked, but she just shook her head and stared at the floor. Stared blankly, not glared like the Genevieve he was used to.

Damien sighed, and set his wineglass down, then rubbed his fingers through his beard on one cheek in a nervous gesture. "I had hoped to get through this more easily. But... she's... sensitive to references to the passage of time right now."

"What 'this'?" Adam asked warily.

Damien looked back over his shoulder at his wife, and Jason wanted to tell the boy – no, young *man* – to go over there and hold her. But the King turned back to look at them, and as he met those clear, grey eyes, Jason realized that Damien was nearly thirty. Not so *young* after all. An ancient-seeming sorrow was in those eyes for a moment, blinked away by determination and the bone-deep compassion that made it so hard for so many people to meet the King's eyes.

"You know – everyone knows – that we've been trying to have a child. And that we haven't succeeded. You know how vital it is that

we produce an Heir to the Realm... and you're aware that the Sword hasn't spoken for anyone."

"You gave Rosa the Heir's Ring," Adam objected.

"We all knew that was temporary," Genevieve replied without moving or looking up. "And with two little girls to take care of... Rosa asked that I take it back." She held up her hand, and Jason saw the dull glitter of the huge grey pearl.

"And we all know why Genevieve wearing the Ring won't work," Damien continued. "Despite how useful it was for her to have it when we faced Lord Prydeen, she won't survive me by long, which does the Realm no good at all. We need someone whom the Sword will speak for, who can take the Throne after me, and who will rule well and wisely."

Jason cocked his head. "You've had everyone of noble birth touch the hilt of that Blade during their public Vassal Oaths, right down to the sons and daughters of families that only rule baronies and likely wouldn't have a clue on how to rule a nation. Even *me*. The whole Realm knows that the Sword hasn't spoken for anyone. Can't you just name another interim Heir?"

And maybe Genny can take a rest and have a better chance at carrying the next child to term, he thought, but did not dare say. He'd suggested as much to her before and gotten a tongue-lashing for it. Nor had she slowed down.

"I can," Damien said quietly. "And I may have to. If the Sword will not speak."

Adam gave him another wary look. "You're not going to make Jason try again, are you?"

Jason gave his love an odd look. Not that he wanted to be Heir to the Throne, but it wouldn't bother him to hold the Monarch's Blade again. He doubted it would prove any more illuminating – literally – than the first time

...though somehow *Adam* had avoided touching the thing, as far as Jason knew. Not that there was much more chance the ancient Sword would Choose a baronetta's son than a countess's. Damien had agreed to stop trying for the families below baronies... in part to spare his Captain, it seemed, and in part because there were simply too *many* to do an exhaustive set of tests. And if Damien couldn't see the thing done *properly*...

The young King shook his head. “We... Genevieve, Aldred, and I... have done some historical research,” which meant it was mostly Damien, “and have come to the conclusion that the Blade is highly unlikely to speak for anyone who is not of Alsterling blood.”

That wasn’t exactly news. It also wasn’t exactly *helpful*, given that King Reginald – and his pet sorcerer – had exterminated every last legitimate scion of the royal line. Damien had even tried handing the sword to his bastard relatives to no avail – not that a number of them hadn’t tried to parlay that minimal recognition of their parentage into some sort of appointment, or position, or at least wealth. And then, of course, there was Harold the Usurper – who had not been unique in his ambition or attempt, just merely the one with the best backing and most nearly successful.

“Poor planning on the part of the original spell-caster,” Genevieve said sourly. “Since its one *useful* function is to identify men and women who will rule *well*.”

“It does more than that,” the young King said mildly over his shoulder. She sniffed, and went back to listlessly regarding the flagstones.

“You’ve met every farthest-flung Alsterling cousin at this point,” Adam told him. “Who’s left?”

“No one,” Damien admitted. “And therein lies our problem. Queen Marian assures me that the Sword *will* speak for one or more of our children. And once it does, I can name a Regent in case of my death.”

A strange pass when the word of the ghost of a long-dead Queen was what they had to rely upon.

“But first you need to *have* a child,” Adam said dryly. “Or several of them. And Genevieve isn’t getting any younger.” He folded his arms and leaned back, clearly not-saying ‘and what are *we* supposed to do about this mess?’

“No.” Damien took a deep breath and stood up. Genevieve made a sort of strangled noise that might have been a sob from another woman and wrapped her gauze-draped arms around herself.

The young King came around the table and sank gracefully to one knee in front of his Champion. He met Jason’s eyes with those clear, grey ones, and the knight was thrown back to the memory of himself kneeling in the Royal Library before the nineteen-year-old Damien

and pledging himself and his sword to the young prince... Only at that point had they been able to persuade him to move permanently out of the Library at last.

“You’ve heard the prophecy that Lord Prydeen spoke with his last, dying breath. Genevieve will not conceive my firstborn first. He added a coda to it that only she and I heard: that we had a *Champion* of a problem.” He held out his hand to Jason.

“My Champion, my friend, my brother. Will you do this for us? And for the Realm?”

Time seemed to slow, stop.

Jason couldn’t even breathe.

His eyes met Genevieve’s across the room. His wondering, hers reluctant but drawn.

“Damien, do you *know* what you’re *saying*?” Adam said harshly, breaking the spell.

The not-so-young King transferred his gaze to his second oldest friend, and offered his other hand. His voice remained calm, even. “I am asking Jason to father a child with Genevieve. A child to be acknowledged as mine. I am asking you both to make a sacrifice,” he cut off Adam’s next words, “but in return you will know the child is also yours. And I will name Jason as Regent-Presumptive.”

“Damien—” Adam began again, angrily.

“Adam.” The King stopped him, but gently. “Do you think I don’t know what you’ve been through? If there were any other way, I would not ask. *We* would not ask. But there is no one else we can trust this much.”

“Trust never to reveal the true parentage of the child,” Adam said, bitterly.

Damien lowered his eyes. “Yes. You’ll watch the child growing up calling me ‘father’ and you – both of you – ‘uncle.’ But... the child will exist. And still be yours. And *you* will know.” He stood up, and stepped away. “Don’t... say anything right now. Talk to each other. Think it over.” He turned away, tension radiating from him that said he knew what *Adam’s* decision would be. His words were the sort of polite dismissal that Damien often offered as an escape from the royal presence.

“Jase, let’s go,” Adam prodded, standing up abruptly.

But Jason's eyes were still on Genevieve. His friend, his Queen, who was half-killing herself to fulfill her duty to the Realm... and to her soul-bonded husband whom she loved so well. Her soul-bonded husband... the boy-prince that Jason had half-raised, for all that Damien had legally been an adult when they met.

He also stood, but slowly.

"Jason," Adam said more urgently.

Jason focused on his true love, "Adam. I have to do this."

"Jason, you don't," Adam said, almost pleading. "This is too much for a king to ask."

"Not for my *king*," Jason said softly. "For our *friends*." He put his arms around Adam. "We've... talked about having a child." Well, *Adam* had talked. It seemed... a much more *fraught* issue for Jason than for his love, and he'd kept as silent as Adam let him be on the subject. "For us... there's *this* or adoption."

"*Our* child, not one who will never even *know*..."

"Adam, beloved," he whispered into his love's ear. "She's growing weaker with each miscarriage. Too much longer and we'll be mourning them both and trying to hold together a country tearing itself apart without an Heir."

"You *want* this," Adam tried to push him away, his eyes filled with hurt and anger and... confusion? "You want *her*."

He had never lied to Adam... except by omission. "Yes."

Adam froze. Apparently, he had thrown that out there simply to get a rise out of Jason.

"But it's just a *physical* reaction. I don't love her the way I love you. *You* should know *that*," Jason added slightly reproachfully... and somewhat mendaciously. "I'm yours until the day I die. But... they *need* us. And *I*... need to do this."

Adam sagged, resting his head on his love's shoulder. "I can't like this. But..."

"My heart is yours alone," Jason promised, vaguely thinking that this was too *easy*, then let both Adam and the thought go.

Adam collapsed back onto the couch in a posture of despondence utterly at odds with the alert demeanor he never let slip outside of their bedchamber. Even the Captain's glower at Damien seemed little better than halfhearted... and his eyes seemed... *conflicted*, if Jason was going to try to match a word to the expression.

The King's Champion made his way across the room and stood in front of Genevieve. Lifted her chin. For the first time in five years, he didn't even try to suppress the intense *physical* reaction he had felt every time he touched her, beginning with when he had caught her hand as she climbed onto the royal reviewing stand during Damien's coronation festivities.

His oldest true friend. He trusted her... and he knew how badly Adam wanted a child. That was all this was. All it had ever been. An... anticipation of how he could solve this problem...

Her glorious blue-green eyes met his, filled with mixed emotions. Surprise. Resentment. Relief. Desire... Jason suddenly understood that her harsh denunciation of his attempts to help her after that last miscarriage had been a fear of this moment. She and Damien must have already decided that it was time to ask.

The kiss was as sweet and passionate as five years of waiting could make it.

And she did not touch him with so much as a fingertip, as mindful as he of those who watched them both with aching hearts.

Reluctantly, he stepped away.

"Yes," Jason gave the answer in words. Some things needed to be said aloud to be real. "But not today." He looked at his King. "Genny needs to recover properly from that last miscarriage. She hasn't told you, I'd wager, that I carried her out of the negotiating tent when she collapsed. *Again*." Damien's stricken look was all the confirmation he needed. "If she really can conceive and carry my child, her body needs to be ready to do it."

Damien nodded.

"Three months," Jason stipulated, looking as sternly as his awakened desire made possible at the truculent Queen. He leveled a finger at her. "Three months of rest. Here. In the castle. Letting others wait on you. Eating properly. No sword-practice. No riding. No sex. No *politics*."

He folded his arms, and waited while she glowered at him. Then gave one sharp nod.

Jason remembered that glower from the twelve-year-old Genevieve who had wanted to visit the dark underbelly of the city. And the nod, from when she'd agreed to go with him to a secret grotto outside the city and 'learn' swordplay from him instead.

Adam barked a harsh laugh. “Well, I guess I have nothing to worry about. She’ll never make three months. Without *politics*.” The sarcastic emphasis implied a world of other meanings.

Jason was across the room in three long strides. “You will never have anything to worry about. Regardless of what Her Majesty does or does not do.”

He looked at the King and Queen. Damien’s expression was an odd mixture of hope and despair. Genevieve’s was... truculent. But Jason knew that the twelve-year-old Genevieve had yielded to his persuasion not to go seeking trouble when he had offered to teach her swordplay. And had not gone back on her word. For three months.

She had already been good, with a natural talent for the blade. And she’d likely been training longer than he had, since they started them young in the mountains of Elaarwen – with swords as well as with much else. And since her father was on the verge of declaring himself in open Rebellion to the Crown, and likely thought his only child would need to know how to protect herself.

Jason had still been better. And, more to the point, there had been no other way for her to practice while at Court, under the misogynistic eye of King Reginald and his sorcerer lackey.

“Thank you,” Damien said softly. He had moved to his wife’s side, taken her hand. His eyes were on Jason – or was it Adam? – but it wasn’t entirely clear to whom he was speaking.

The Champion nodded once, and wrapped his arm about his love. “Let’s go.”

Adam seared them all with a scathing look and stalked from the room.



Keep an eye out for the NEXT book in the
Chronicles of Ilseador
The Pirate King

Available at fine online bookstores everywhere by
April 2024

Or check out another series
by Kerridwen Mangala McNamara in the same world
(but across the ocean):
The Knightess of the Realm series begins with
A Not-So-Sacrificial Maiden