

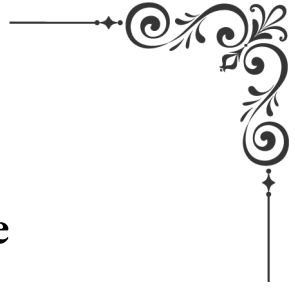
Fiona's Choice

By Mary Rose Kreger

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Fiona's Choice

To my beloved Madoc and our son Will:

During the ten years since I made my choice at Flaxen Grove, I imagine one question has haunted all your thoughts: why? Why did your wife, your mother, choose to leave you? Nothing pains me more than your ignorance on this, or the fact that you may have misunderstood my actions.

The time has come for me to tell you my story.

Here is my tale of Flaxen Grove, as I remember it. I pray that the truth, however painful, will bring you peace. Lord Amaranth's crimes destroyed our family's happiness that day, perhaps forever. Comfort me, then, by finding my love buried beneath his lust and hate.

Yours Faithfully,

Fiona Chisholm Owain



10 YEARS EARLIER, IN Gwynedd Castle, on the Isle of Avalon

"Let me come with you, Mama," my son Will begged one last time.
"I need to protect you."

I gave him a comforting smile and kissed his burning forehead. Sweat dampened his wheat-colored hair, and his grey-green eyes glistened with fever.

“We’re going for a ride in the countryside, not into battle, my brave boy. Stay home and rest. We’ll be back in Gwynedd before you know it.”

“But it’s dangerous,” he insisted.

It grieved me to see such grown-up worry in his childish eyes. Avalon had been at peace for the past year, but my seven-year-old was accustomed to war. Lord Amaranth’s army had besieged the castle three times during Will’s short lifetime, and he was old enough to remember it.

Not my younger son, though. Little Ewan was four years old, and thankfully remembered nothing but his Mama and Papa’s love.

“Don’t worry,” Ewan said, bouncing up and down beside Will’s bed. “I take care of Mama.” He pointed at his chest with pride.

“You better,” Will muttered.

Ewan grinned, then leaned over and planted a wet kiss on his brother’s forehead. Will made a face, but let him do it.

“Bye, Ewan,” he sighed.

Ewan squealed with excitement and raced for the door. “We’re going for a ride!”

At the same moment, the first rays of morning light burst through the castle window, painting Will in shades of rose. His waving fingers glowed red, as if dipped in blood.

My stomach tightened with apprehension. *Perhaps Will’s right—maybe Avalon still isn’t safe enough for a pleasure ride.*

But there was no turning back now. The King and Queen had agreed to the journey, and as the lady of Gwynedd Castle, it was my duty to accompany them.

I left Will in the healer’s care, then entrusted Ewan to his nursemaid so I could ready myself for the day’s ride.

I headed down the long hallway alone, taking in the familiar aromas of the castle: crushed lavender, melted beeswax, and always a hint of the

sea. My husband's keep stood on the shores of the Western Sea, and all its rooms held the ocean's enchanting scent. Even indoors, I could feel a bit of salty breeze lift the edges of my flame-colored hair.

Blue sandstone walls and fine woven tapestries paved the way to our bedroom quarters.

My footsteps paused before our Owain family portrait, which my husband Madoc had hired an Artist Proficient to create the year before. I loved the beautiful way the Proficient had painted all of us together—Madoc, myself, Will, and Ewan. It showed us everything we had gained since my arrival in Avalon ten years ago.

But the portrait also hinted at everything between Madoc and I that was still unsettled. The bouquet of wild lilies clutched in my painted fingers, representing the firstborn daughter we had lost. The scar curving along Madoc's jaw, where Lord Amaranth had cut him on the night Ewan was conceived. Ewan himself, who thankfully looked like me, his mother, in almost every respect, enough to keep the servants' gossip down to a minimum.

My hands clenched tight.

No one had seen Amaranth for months, the night he came to Gwynedd for me. I wasn't safe from the bastard then, and we're no safer now.

I turned away from the portrait and opened the doors to our bedroom chamber.

"Madoc?" I called. "Madoc, dearest?"

No answer.

"Madoc, where the blazes are you?"

I pushed aside the sea blue curtains that separated our bedroom from the chamber's entrance. My husband stood by our bed, dressed only in his deer-skin leggings and riding boots. His torso twisted towards me at the sound of my voice, sending an attractive ripple through his muscular back and shoulders.

"Aw, there's my fiery nightingale." The smile he gave me lit up his entire face. "Come and kiss me, before Stevens returns with our breakfast."

I closed the curtain behind me and wrapped my arms around his bare neck. His close-cropped beard scratched my chin as I kissed him.

“My man Madoc,” I murmured.

He kissed me deeper in return. Each of his gestures was dear and familiar, the practiced movements of our eight years of marriage. We’d taught ourselves how to dance into each other’s arms, to show love and respect with the tiniest movements, the smallest of gestures. Our shared love had become unique and unrepeatable.

But I remembered a time when that was not so, when we hadn’t known each other so well. A time when it was still possible for a stranger to imitate and deceive us. I remembered the night of Amaranth’s visit, more than four years past:

He passed through the same sea blue curtains, wheat hair drenched from riding in the summer rain, a smile on his lips and a light in his eyes.

“I’ve come home early, my love.” His hands spread wide, and I ran to embrace and kiss him—

“What is it?” Madoc asked, his words soft in my ear.

He came that night, looking and sounding and smelling of my Madoc, and I believed him, I accepted his touch—

Stop. I let out a tight breath. *Don’t torment yourself, Fiona.*

“Tell me again,” I asked Madoc, my voice heavy with misery. “Tell me this is real.”

Madoc pulled away, far enough for us to gaze upon each other, face to face. His strong hands cupped my cheeks.

“It *is* real. I love you, Fiona. Blue skies and a green wood the day I met you.”

“Storm clouds and grey waves the day I chose you,” I answered.

“And, fair or stormy, I will stand with you, until...”

I swallowed hard. “Until our footsteps cross the pale shores to Founder’s Home.”

“Oh Madoc.” I curved into the hollow of his shoulder, felt the heat of his skin and the beat of his heart. “I will never deserve you.”

“Ha,” he sighed, “I shall never be worthy of *you*, Fiona.”
I kissed him again, and my spirits soared.



WHAT A RIDE! I ON MY chestnut mare, Willowgrace, with my son Ewan before me in the saddle. Madoc on my left, the Queen and little Princess Philia on my right. The King and his entourage before us, the Queen's twin brothers riding behind.

The King's Company was awash in turquoise, cream, and vermilion, the national colors of Avalon. How boldly the King's flags unfurled under a flawless October sky! How bravely we cantered forward, singing the ballads of the Seven Founders across the open Gwynedd countryside! The last waves of harvest sprawled out like autumn's final gift before us, all the way down to the Sacred Wood.

We took a long tour through the Wood's southern section, traveling between columns of tall, flame-colored tannin pines and golden strands of ivy. We stopped a few times, as the King and Queen desired, to take in a particularly lovely section of woodland, and later to enjoy a picnic in an abandoned faerie glen.

“This trip does my spirit so much good, Fiona,” the Queen said. Her brown eyes sparkled with delight.

Princess Philia perked up in her saddle. “Oh yes, it's so pretty!” She bounced up and down on her pony, who kept trotting patiently forward. “I only wish Will could see it, too.”

“I wish so, too, Your Highness,” I told her.

“It's just, it's my fault,” the six-year-old Princess exclaimed. She looked close to shedding tears. “Will caught a fever because he fell in the moat for me, to fetch me those white roses.”

What she said was true, so I didn't contradict her.

“Then you must bring something back for Will, to thank him for his chivalry,” the Queen suggested.

The Princess's turquoise eyes sparked with mischief. "I already did, Mama. I got him these pinecones."

She pointed at her lap, and I saw her royal skirt was filled with them. Tannin pinecones in shades of red, green, and gold.

The Queen and I laughed.

"Those will brighten his spirits, Your Highness," I reassured her.

"Fiona, my lovely," Madoc interrupted from our left. "We've arrived at Flaxen Grove."

I blushed as I met my husband's blue eyes. Many years ago Madoc had proposed to me here, on a bright April morning, when all the spring ephemerals were in bloom.

The Grove looked quite different today. Instead of spring blossoms, we were greeted by wild chrysanthemums and sweet-smelling heather. The trees lining the valley's rim were grey and bare, clothed only with intermittent patches of ivy. But the Grove's merry creek still murmured and splashed its way across the valley, creating a hundred tiny waterfalls and a peaceful murmuring sound.

"Ah," the King exclaimed from ahead of us. "Now here is a sight worth seeing."

As we rode into the valley, admiring the views, an unsettling thought entered my mind.

This part of the Wood is thick with faerie magic.

I slowed my horse, and allowed the Queen and Princess to ride ahead.

The Faeries were masters of illusion, and the ones living in the Wood were no friends of Avalon. They were the ones who stole our daughter Mary, when she was a tiny babe. They were the ones who gave Amaranth the magic to deceive me that awful night.

Madoc was watching me.

"Think on happy things today, my love. Our son Will is brave, and Ewan is healthy and strong." He smiled at Ewan and ruffled his flame-red hair.

“Ugh, stop it, Papa!” Ewan giggled.

The north wind stung my cheeks, and I shivered beneath my autumn riding cloak.

“Oh Madoc,” I whispered. “What if...*he* finds out?”

What if Amaranth discovers that Ewan is his son?

“Mama, let’s keep going,” Ewan interrupted, oblivious to my concern.

I obliged him. Madoc stayed beside us. Fresh worry creased his brow, and I saw him run his hand along *Llewgallon’s* silver hilt.

We both knew that Ewan wasn’t Madoc’s. He looked everything like me, his mama, and nothing like an Owain. Besides, Madoc had been there that night, and had rescued me from a worse fate—kidnapping at Amaranth’s hands. When we found out I was with child a month later, we guessed the babe might have a different father.

“I know I haven’t been able to protect you as I wish, Fiona,” Madoc said, to my surprise. “I am sorry I’ve not been able to bring you more happiness.”

His fingers tightened around my hand, which he raised to his lips and kissed.

By the Founders, he loves me. He loves me still.

“What greater happiness could you give me,” I said, “then the gift of your love?”

The chainmail under Madoc’s tunic clinked softly as he traced a line across his heart. “On our wedding day, we became one. Every day and year since, our union has grown still stronger. Could anyone ever split the bond between our two hearts?”

I shook my head fiercely.

“Nay, never. Someday he may come again to do his worst, but he cannot stop my love for you.” I squeezed my lips together in a determined line. “He will never have me again, Madoc. He will never have me.”

“*Who*, Mama?” Ewan demanded.

“Never you mind, little one.” I squeezed his shoulder.

Madoc's eyes warmed with the heat of my words. Slow and steady, my husband's love, but relentless as the sea.

"Fiona," he began, but I never heard the rest of it.

The Queen's twin brothers, Raven and Hamish Lee, came up from behind us. Raven leaned forward in his saddle and squinted across the valley.

"There's something moving under that patch of trees," he announced, pointing to our right. "Do you see it, Hamish?"

Hamish pulled his black steed up beside his brother. He was a head and a half taller than Raven, with the build of a professional fighter.

"There's nothing to see," Hamish said, and then he slammed his sword hilt into the side of Raven's head.

Raven swayed in his saddle, then crumpled to the ground.

Madoc and I froze, our gaze flicking back and forth between the calm, collected figure of Sir Hamish, and the broken form of his brother.

"Hamish," I said first. "What..."

Hamish squinted towards the eastern tree line, then waved both his arms high in the air, as if sending out a signal. A moment later I saw soldiers, dressed in Amaranth's colors, marching down into the valley from the east, north, and south.

"Madoc, look," I said. "It's *him!*" Amaranth's men had found us.

When Madoc followed my gaze, his confusion quickly solidified into outrage and fury.

"Traitor!!!" He shouted, pointing at Hamish. "Traitor in our midst!"

The King and his company turned back at his cries.

"Protectors of Avalon, retreat!" Madoc called out to the King's Company, which consisted of the King's personal bodyguards and several watchmen. "It's an ambush! Enemies from the east!"

"From the north and south, too," I added. Even as I spoke, more soldiers emerged from the western tree line, cutting off our best means of escape.

“Pull all together, men,” the King cried, now seeing the danger. “We must break through their defenses as one, or be crushed.” He brandished his mighty blade *Nevertarnish* and gestured to the southwest, where Amaranth’s line of soldiers was thinnest. His guards and watchmen snapped into formation around him and the Queen. The Queen had taken the Princess onto her horse and was shielding her beneath an armored cloak.

I moved to do the same. I helped Ewan slide behind me on the saddle and cast my speckled autumn cloak over his trembling body.

“Mama, what’s happening?” he whimpered.

And how could I answer him?

Madoc and I rode forward to join the King’s protective circle, but Hamish blocked our way.

“Let us pass, traitor.” Madoc raised his sword to back up his words.

Hamish remained before us, barring our path.

“Amaranth wants the King and his heir, not you, Owain,” he said. “Take your family and leave this place. While you still can.” He nodded towards the Faerie Path, where a promising gap had opened up between the trees.

“And why should we trust you?” I snapped back, before Madoc could answer. “You’ll betray your own sister, but not your friends?”

Hamish wasn’t listening. He’d taken the crossbow hanging from his saddle and was aiming an arrow at the center of the Company. Straight towards the King.

“No!” Madoc charged forward and flung out an arm to stop Hamish’s shot, but the larger man shrugged him off. My husband rebounded with a mighty swing from *Llewgalon*. A slash of green-gold glass, hard as diamond, and then blood gushed freely from Hamish’s ear.

Hamish cried out, but his crossbow still hit its target: Bran, King of Avalon.

The King drooped forward on his horse, and his shield arm dangled at his side. An ugly black arrow stuck out of his shoulder.

“Oh Hamish, how could you?” Hot, angry tears stung my eyes. “You know how Bran loved you—how we all loved you.” They had been so close, the four friends: Bran, Hamish, Raven, and my Madoc.

Now only Madoc remained to face the traitor.

“Leave, Fiona!” Hamish shouted. “Only suffering waits for you here.” The north wind picked up and tousled his coal-black hair, and his brooding eyes burned with intensity.

Horns sounded across the valley. They blew long and low and deep, and then arrows started raining from the sky. Dozens of Amaranth’s soldiers, crouched along the tree line, were shooting arrows into the King’s Company.

The Company threw up their shields around the royal family, while the watchmen sent return arrows back towards Amaranth’s soldiers. The watchmen’s arrows hit their soldier targets. However, the Watch had virtually no protection in the open valley. One, two, three watchmen fell. Four, five, six slumped still and lifeless on the heather. A third round of arrows—the seventh and final watchmen collapsed, a mere stone’s throw from the King.

I swallowed a sob of horror. Those watchmen were from our province. They ate and drank from our table, performed dangerous missions to protect our land. Some of them were my Madoc’s friends.

All gone now.

The Company did not fare much better. Despite the partial protection offered by their knightly shields, more than half of them also succumbed to the archers’ barrage.

I had no shield, and my cloak would only deflect the weakest of arrows. We could no longer join the King’s Company because Amaranth’s soldiers had filled the gap between us.

But I was still alive, and my husband and son alive with me. And Will, thank the Founders, was safe in Gwynedd.

"The Faerie Path," I breathed. Madoc couldn't hear me over the din, but he nodded when he saw where I was pointing. More soldiers surged about us, separating us.

"No! Madoc, stay with me!"

My Madoc now rode alone, surrounded by the enemy on all sides.

"Go!" He shouted. "Before they take you!"

Run, if you ever loved him at all. Run, and call for aid!

I kned *Willowgrace* in the stomach, and she bolted towards the Faerie Path.

Ewan shrieked and clutched his fingers about my waist in a death grip.

"Hold on tight, love," I told him. "We must ride back and find the King's reserve party." If His Majesty had brought one with him for this journey, I wasn't certain.

As we galloped towards the Path, I felt the press of the three hunting knives I had strapped against my chest. After the night of Amaranth's deception, Raven had taught me how to fight with and throw the blades. When Amaranth's men came for me and Ewan, I'd be ready.

"Is that her? Amaranth's woman?" A knight on horseback called. His horse veered toward us from my right-hand side, easily matching *Willowgrace's* pace.

"How dare you!" I took my first blade and slashed the reins from the eejit's hands. His horse, suddenly unrestrained, backed away and nearly sent his mount tumbling. "I am no one's woman!"

The knight regained control of his horse and returned to my side.

"If you weren't before, you will be now," the knight laughed. "Gold Company, attend! We have our target!"

Five, ten, fifteen warriors, all on horseback, turned as one towards me and Ewan. They encircled us with remarkable precision, forcing me to slow down and stop, or else hit a wall of armor and horseflesh.

These men are elites. Probably the best horsemen in Amaranth's retinue.
I swallowed and held my blades high. *Why would Amaranth waste his best men on me?*

Ewan whimpered under my cloak. He had seen the men drawing their swords.

"Hush, little one. Stay hidden," I whispered.

Two warriors reared forward, but I swung out my knives and fended them away.

"Get back," I snarled. "A caged woman can still bite."

"Who's that you've got with you, lady?"

"*Mama!*"

I swung to the right, and spotted a burly soldier trying to yank Ewan out of the saddle.

"Don't—you—touch—my—boy!!!" I raised my left hand and threw my first knife into the soldier's bare throat. To my horror and surprise, the knife stuck. The soldier gurgled and clutched at the blade, then toppled from his horse.

I grimaced and turned to block the man from Ewan's sight.

I killed him.

My stomach flipped, and I forced myself not to throw up.

Focus, Fiona. So you can survive.

"I'll do the same to anyone of you that comes too close," I said.

The first knight whistled and laughed. "Oy, oy, what a fireball. No wonder my lord is so smitten with you, Lady Fiona."

I called him something not so polite, then spat in his nasty, jaundiced face.

The knight's smile shifted to a scowl. "You'll pay for your disrespect, you—"

"Well done, Sir Denzel," said a new but familiar voice. Soft and smooth as silk.

"My lord," Sir Denzel saluted and straightened in his saddle. All the horsemen surrounding me and Ewan did the same.

Lord Amaranth, the King's half-brother and most bitter enemy, entered the circle. He was a tall, slender man, and on horseback, even taller. I had to raise my head to glimpse his face.

Amaranth's skin glistened like moonlight, and the long, bone-white threads of his hair glowed like spun silver. His battle attire was striking and well-made, from his black and gold-crested armor to the fine metallic details on his arm and leg guards. He almost looked handsome, if it was possible for such an evil man to be deemed attractive.

My gaze fell to his hands. In the one, he held a naked glass blade, dripping fresh blood. In the other, a golden crown set with rubies and pearls. The crown of my King.

Has His Majesty fallen, then?

"The King lies good as dead, his warriors slaughtered, and now at last I come to claim my prize." Amaranth purred with all the satisfaction of a well-fed cat. "The beautiful, ravishing Fiona Chisholm."

"Fiona *Owain*," I retorted. "Or have you forgotten my husband now?"

Amaranth lifted his hand. Two soldiers jogged into the circle, dragging a prisoner between them.

I drew in a sharp breath. *He has Madoc.*

They'd beaten Madoc badly, and stripped him of his fine tunic and armor. Madoc's nose was broken and both of his eyes were swollen near shut. Cuts and bruises covered his body, and he sagged in the hold of his two guards.

My heart ached in my chest. I longed to wrap my arms around my Madoc and comfort him, to heal all the spots where *he* had damaged him.

"Lord Amaranth." I said instead. I tightened my cloak, hoping to hide Ewan's shaking form. "What do you want with us?"

Amaranth glanced down at Madoc, then gave me a sickly smile.

"I am here to take you home, sweetheart."

The term of endearment made my skin crawl. All the more so because the creep sounded like he meant it.

“You will never have me.” I spoke loudly for Madoc’s sake, hoping he would understand my words as a promise.

Amaranth’s dead-blue eyes bored into mine, and I knew then that what Sir Denzel had said was true: I *was* Amaranth’s woman. When he gazed at me, it was not just with lust, as I’d expected, but also a strange kind of admiration, tenderness...love.

In his mind, anyways.

“Fiona, sweetheart. Come and be a family with me. You, me...and our son.”

His gaze fell on Ewan, who gasped and buried himself deeper beneath my cloak. I wrapped the speckled fabric tighter around him.

“Madoc is his father,” I declared. “He’s the one who has loved, raised, and encouraged him these last four years. Aye. Madoc is his father.”

Madoc glanced up, met my eyes. His silence frightened me.

Amaranth shrugged. “The boy will call no one Father anymore, but me.”

“Ha! If you want my son, you’ll have to kill me first.” Anger surged through my veins like wildfire. I slashed the air before me with both knives.

Amaranth’s lips curled downward with displeasure. “Come with me, or your lover dies.”

“My *husband*,” I corrected. “Eight years ago I chose him, not you. Or have you forgotten that, too, ‘Ranth?”

If possible, Amaranth’s face grew even paler, as if fury had sucked all the blood from his skin.

“I have killed the King and eliminated your other protectors,” he boasted. “Now I will have you for myself. Be you willing or no.”

“No, never!”

He reached for my arm, but I sliced him with my knife. Blood oozed from the wound, making him curse.

“Let us take her down, my lord,” Sir Denzel said, his tone eager and vile. “We’ll teach her some respect.” The other soldiers hollered in agreement.

Amaranth clamped a hand over his bleeding arm. “No, she’s not to be touched by the rest of you. I don’t want her...damaged.”

Sir Denzel retreated a step, looking disappointed. I swallowed back my disgust.

“Yes, come closer, all of you!” I challenged them. “Come closer, so I can plunge my blade into your cold, empty hearts!”

I nudged Willowgrace hard, causing her to surge forward. The wind caught my orange-red hair and sent my cloak billowing behind me as I flourished my blade into the evening sky.

“Fie, she’s no human, but some avenging faerie angel,” muttered one of the soldiers. He and a few other horsemen backed away.

“Madoc!” I kneed Willowgrace ahead and sent all three of us—the horse, Ewan, and myself—charging into the larger of Madoc’s two guards. “Take my hand!”

The guard released Madoc’s arm rather than be trampled, and my fingers brushed against my husband’s bare shoulder. He looked up at me then, squinting out of his two swollen eyes, and seized my outstretched hand.

“Fiona,” he said. “Fly.”

In my peripheral vision, I saw Amaranth leap down from his horse.

We have to go. Now.

I clamped my hand around Madoc’s wrist and pulled. “If I must go, you’re coming with—”

Madoc’s bloodcurdling scream stopped the words in my throat. I dropped my hold on his arm, thinking my pulling had injured him, but his cry only intensified.

“Stay, Willowgrace.” I halted and turned in my saddle.

Amaranth had taken a black blade and was driving it slowly, slowly, slowly into the hollow of Madoc’s shoulder. The same shoulder where

I'd rested my head, only this morning, and listened to his heart beat. Madoc's knees buckled, but another soldier rushed to his side and forced him back upright.

"A little deeper now," Amaranth said, "and I'll reach the bone."

"Run, Fiona! I'll—" A new and horrible sound tore out of my Madoc. Pure agony. His whole body shook from the impact of Amaranth's blade.

"Oh God, stop. Please stop!"

"It's called mazine," Somehow I could hear Amaranth's words over both mine and Madoc's screams. "A new drug of mine that, as you can hear, intensifies pain." He nudged the blade deeper into Madoc's shoulder. "The slower the cut, the more it *stings*."

Another long, drawn-out cry of pain. It cut me, too, deep in my heart, a poison in my soul.

He's hurting my Madoc, because he wants me for himself.

"Mama, I'm scared," Ewan howled, pressing his face into my back. "Don't let them hurt Daddy anymore, please."

"Run, Fiona!" Madoc repeated. I watched his head drop to one side, but the guards struck him to keep him conscious. Conscious, and in unbearable pain.

My husband had ordered me to run, and I wanted to. If I ran, I'd either be free or die. If I stayed...I'd become Amaranth's slave. His *woman*.

Madoc knew this, too. Even under torture, that was the thought that had filled his noble mind: *Fiona must have her freedom*.

He loved me, loved me still. Even as Amaranth stole his life away. Even as the mazine bombarded him with pain.

A miserable sob caught in my throat. I stayed frozen on Willowgrace, tousled hair thrown over one shoulder, nervous teeth gnawing my lower lip, blazing yellow fear paralyzing me in place.

"It's more than just Madoc that you need to think of," Amaranth said, giving his blade a nasty jerk. Madoc gasped and his complexion shifted to ashen grey. "I know you left your son Will behind in Gwynedd.

My spies there can kill him at any time, if you refuse to obey me.” He threw a malevolent grin in my direction. “Shall I give them permission?”

“No!” I made my choice, and flung both my blades onto the grass. “You can take me. Just let Madoc go, and leave our Will alone.”

Amaranth’s poisoned blade stayed buried in Madoc’s shoulder.

“Come on, sweetheart.” He beckoned me forward. “Show me you mean it.”

I slid from my horse. Ewan wouldn’t let go of me, so I carried him in my arms. This meant I had to bring him closer to Amaranth, but at least the soldiers wouldn’t touch him.

“Kiss me, Fiona, and I’ll let him go.”

I made a cry of protest, but stopped when I saw Amaranth’s devilish expression.

Better do as he says, or he’ll kill Madoc out of spite.

I moved forward, took a deep breath, and kissed Amaranth on the lips. A real kiss, although the gorge rose into my throat, and his taste and scent were all wrong, and this kiss was all wrong, because he was not my Madoc and I would never love him.

But I kissed him for Madoc and Will’s sake, not my own.

Amaranth’s sharp teeth bit my lip, and I tasted blood. I squirmed, but his arm held me tight. Around us, the soldiers cheered. My cheeks burned with humiliation.

“That’s better.” And then at last he withdrew the blade from Madoc’s shoulder. The guards released their hold, allowing Madoc to sink to the ground.

“You will ride with me to the Capital,” Amaranth said with triumph. “We’ll meet my armies in the Rivershield, and when I have conquered the city and become king...you shall be my queen.”

Did he think his grandiose plan would please me?

He had lessened his grip, so I fell to my knees to make my final request.

“I will come with you, my lord.” I pressed my face against his fine tunic. “But first, take pity on your Fiona. Let me say good-bye to my Madoc. *Please.*”

His silence lasted an eternity.

“Go to him then.” His cold and bloody hand caressed the bodice of my dress. “And tonight, remember the kindness I showed you.”

I grimaced, understanding his foul intentions. “Yes, my lord.”

I took Ewan by the hand and knelt down beside Madoc. I gently lifted his head and placed it in my lap, so I could clean his face with my cloak. When I had finished, his eyes fluttered opened and he smiled at me.

“My Fiona.”

“My man Madoc. Who still loves me.” I knew these words would comfort him. They were all he ever wanted me to know. Every morning, every evening. *Do you know how I love you?*

I knew. Now, more than ever. He lay broken on the heather because he valued my freedom more than his own life.

“He—he is going to take me now. But—he will never have me. You understand?”

Madoc sighed. Then: “I understand, love.”

I clung to his answer and engraved it in my memory, making it a sure resting place from the indignities soon to come. If Madoc knew the truth, Amaranth would never have me.

“Please. You will care for Will while I am gone? He—he will need you.”

And you will need him, I thought.

“Yes, my love.” His hands, made clumsy from the guards’ maltreatment, searched for mine. “I will come and find you, Fiona.”

I nodded and squeezed his fingers.

“Ewan,” I said. “Say good-bye to your father.”

Ewan, who sat huddled beside me in a trembling, terrified mess, placed his little hand on top of mine and Madoc’s. “Bye, Papa.”

"Ewan," Madoc coughed, winced in pain. "That evil man will tell you he's your father. But I am your Papa, too. Remember that, my son."

"No, no," Ewan clung to Madoc's hands. "You are my only Papa."

The soldiers came for me and Ewan. I let them take me, so that they wouldn't separate me from my son. They lifted us up onto Willowgrace and bound my hands to her saddle, then tethered my horse between two of their own.

"You will obey me, for their sake, Fiona," Amaranth said. "If you do anything to displease me, I can order Madoc or Will's deaths at any time. I can torture them at any time. You think Hamish Lee a traitor? I have a hundred more eyes and ears watching in Avalon. You shall obey me, if you wish your husband and son to live."

I sat up as straight as I could on Willowgrace and dared to meet my captor's eyes.

"All I have done, and will do," I told him, "is done so they may live."

Amaranth frowned. "Your devotion to *me* is what will keep them alive."

The evening shadows crept over Flaxen Grove, casting the King's Company—all fallen?—into darkness. I did not know if any man or woman had escaped. Where was the Queen, and her lovely daughter? Our kind and gracious King, whom Amaranth had slain? Where lay Raven, brave watchman? And his brother Hamish, who had betrayed us all?

Where are they now?

In the morning I had held my Madoc close, imagining the tender night that would follow such a glorious day. I bid farewell to my Will on his sickbed, picturing a thousand more hails and farewells waiting for us on my return. I studied our family portrait, and recognized the cracks that had now split our family apart.

From now on, I live only for them.

Twilight fell as Amaranth ordered his men to the east. I held Ewan close and let the darkness swallow me whole.





About “Fiona’s Choice”

“Fiona’s Choice” takes place ten years before Mary’s young adult fantasy novel, AVALON LOST. It received an Honorable Mention in the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future contest for Fall 2020.



About the Author

Mary Rose Kreger lives in the metro Detroit area with her family, where she writes fantasy for teens, and blogs about her spiritual journey: before, during, and after the convent.

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