

❖ Chapter 15 ❖

Kelson watched, keeping his distance, as Mahon warily made his way out of the alley and crept down the street toward the main thoroughfare leading to the closest gate. Where was Nigel? Damn, what was taking him so long? And Dhugal. Dhugal hadn't really taken him seriously, had he? He may have. Kelson had been rather insistent, for Mahon's benefit, and he prayed Dhugal had understood that he was *not* to clear Mahon's way to the gate. Mairona stared at him painfully, pleading, terrified. She began to sob when she saw that he would not move. This is what she had bravely escaped in Druimfada, and he had sworn to protect her. How could he, the mighty King of Gwynedd, be so powerless against one small man?

After what had seemed entirely too long, he heard the sounds of mounted, armed men and footsoldiers from behind him. Finally. Nigel rode up, his mount skidding to a halt in the slippery snow beside the king. "Dhugal is coming around from the other side," he told his nephew.

"Good," the king replied. "There were about four other men who ran away. Get a few soldiers to follow the tracks they made. Take them alive if possible, but not necessarily in one piece."

Nigel nodded, reining back to pick the men. Mahon put Mairona between him and the newly arrived guard.

"Keep them back," he yelled.

"They are not going past me without my command," Kelson said truthfully.

"You give the command and she dies."

Kelson turned behind him and gave his orders quietly. "Get me a bow, with an arrow already nocked. Have it ready to put in my hand when I give the word."

"You are killing her," Mahon sneered, turning the dagger so it would flash in the light of the lanterns. Kelson turned back slowly.

"Kelson, please!" Mairona sobbed, vainly clutching at the arm holding her captive. "I would rather die than let him use me!"

"Silence," Mahon hissed, pricking her skin with the edge of his dagger. She winced as a trickle of blood oozed down her neck, staining her dress. Kelson's fury roared.

"If you harm her you will be dead before you can even blink!"

"But she will be dead first," Mahon grinned. His position was hopeless now that the guard had arrived, and he would no doubt die no matter what happened. But he would take the Haldane's intended queen with him, and torture his master's enemy by teasing him with her life. He would win some honor in his master's eyes. Then there was always the slim chance that the Haldane would be so concerned for Mairona's life that Mahon really could escape, if he took the bride with him all the way to Torenth, and what fun there would be on the way!

A noise erupted behind Mahon. Dhugal emerged from a side street with the other half of the guard, coming to a halt and fanning out several men deep to cut off Mahon's route of escape. "You are trapped," Kelson smiled coldly at Mahon. The Torenthi tightened his grip on Mairona as he looked behind, then turned sideways so he could watch both groups of soldiers. Kelson caught her eye, wide and staring like a trapped, wild animal. Once he was sure he had her attention, he rolled his eyes in his head and slumped ever so slightly in his saddle, then looked back at her. She blinked

in acknowledgement, grasping on to the small hope he offered. Looking briefly at Kelson, eyes filled with pain, she fell limp in a feigned faint. Her captor cursed vehemently as he was thrown off balance, struggling to keep hold of the deadweight in his arms. If he couldn't keep her between himself and the soldiers, he was a dead man.

While Mahon was distracted, Kelson put his hand out for the bow held ready. In one fluid motion, he brought it to a draw and let fly, watching with a thrill of cold satisfaction as he guided the arrow through Mahon's skull. On impact, Mahon pressed the dagger to Mairona's neck, a look of surprise on his face. His mouth slacked open as he fell to the ground. Mairona stepped away, turning to face her former captor as she touched a hand to her wound, where blood spilled down her neck. She pulled her hand away to look at the red staining on her fingers. In a sudden, violent motion, she brought her boot down on Mahon's face, crushing his features, but he felt no pain. He was already dead.

"Morgan, Read him. See what is left," Kelson ordered curtly. "Dhugal, she is bleeding!" He threw the bow at someone and jumped off his horse, running to Mairona. She looked at him with the blank stare of a wild animal caught with nowhere to run. "You are safe, now," he whispered, putting an arm around her waist. He took her hand, but she winced, pulling back. "Dhugal, tend to her," he said impatiently.

Mairona didn't say a word as Dhugal used his rare Deryni skill to Heal the cut on her neck, on her lip, and her sprained wrist, welcoming the odd sensation of spirit hands resting over and guiding his. "Did they cause other injury?" he said, asking if the men had succeeded in their intentions. She shook her head. Kelson embraced her, holding her tightly, but she seemed almost lifeless, and her mind and emotions dead behind her shields.

"Sire," Nigel called, approaching. "The other men have been taken, with little fight."

"Good. See to their uncomfortable confinement," the king ordered, barely taking his eyes off his betrothed as Dhugal finished examining the injuries he had Healed.

"Where is Seánin?" the border duke asked, suddenly noticing her bodyguard's absence. Mairona's head snapped up, holding the red-headed Dhugal in an evil glare. Kelson felt her entire body tense like a tightly wound spring in his arms as she came to life again. She had chosen to go out alone, and Dhugal was questioning her judgement.

"*D'anam don diabhal!*" she screamed, breaking away from Kelson to swing a trained arm at Dhugal's nose. Her fist caught it sideways, and there was a sickening crunch of impact. The young duke stepped back, shocked at the violence of her words and the blood now pouring from his nose..

Her Mearan tongue was close enough to Dhugal's that he understood exactly what she had said, and was shocked to hear it come from a lady's mouth. *May the devil take you!* "What did I do?" he asked, bewildered, as he gingerly felt his injured nose. Mairona burst forward to Kelson's warhorse, jumping up on its back with practiced ease. Besieger pranced nervously, skittish at this unfamiliar rider, but Mairona calmed it with a quick mental command and sent it galloping down the street back toward the cathedral square.

"Mairona, no!" Kelson screamed, grabbing Morgan's horse by the reins. "Damn it!" he muttered, leaping into the saddle to dash after her. She could obviously ride well, if she could control a warhorse like that, but the roads were slippery with snow and the horse could easily fall. *Lord, protect her,* he sent heavenward as he tried to close the distance between them. "Mairona, stop!" he yelled after her repeatedly, but she ignored him, recklessly urging her horse even faster through the winding city streets. Kelson held his breath as her horse stumbled, but it recovered its balance quickly. Praying his own steed was as surefooted, he leaned over the horse's neck and begged it for more speed.

Mairona made it to the cathedral square, coming to a skidding, stumbling halt in front of the large church. She slid off the horse's back and ran up the steps to the portal, heaving the door open and disappearing within. Kelson yanked his mount to a halt in front of the doors, and ran up to follow her inside. The office of Compline was being chanted, led by one of the senior priests, and she had disturbed many of the monks in the choir as she ran heedlessly up the side aisle. One of the older monks left the choir and intercepted her, whispering softly. Suddenly she broke out in hysterical sobs, and half the choir lost track of their singing as they turned to look. The older monk quickly hurried Mairona through a door out of the nave, away from the devotions of his fellow brothers.

Kelson finally caught up with them on a stair past the door, and saw that Mairona was still sobbing through hiccups, tears flowing freely down her cheeks. The monk started when he recognized the king, who looked rather frantic, then he mumbled something unintelligible as he bowed.

"Good Brother, I will care for her," Kelson said.

"Aye, your Highness," the monk replied, stepping away. Kelson continued.

"Is the Archbishop Cardiel here?"

"Nay, Sire, his Grace is at St. Hilary's."

"I do not think he would take ill if we use his study for a time."

The old monk looked hesitant at allowing an unattended, unmarried king into his archbishop's study with a young lady.

"I assure you, Brother, nothing will happen that the archbishop would not approve," Kelson said.

"But what will others think?" the monk asked.

"The lady and I are to be wed in a fortnight," Kelson told him. "Nothing untoward will happen, and no one will think ill. You may chaperone, if you wish."

"Very well, your Highness."

The monk led them to the archbishop's study, opened the door for them, and followed them inside. The room was cold, so after sitting Mairona on a stool Kelson turned to the monk. "Brother, perhaps you could build us a fire?" he commanded.

"Of course, your Highness," the old man bowed. Kelson reached out and touched his neck, bringing swift, sure control with his mind.

"When you are done, be sure to find a seat close to its heat, Brother. At your age, I would not want you to catch cold."

"You are very kind, Sire," the monk replied dreamily. Satisfied that the monk wouldn't interfere or remember what occurred, he turned back to Mairona, whose sobs were quieting, though she still hiccupped fiercely.

"Mairona?" he called. She looked blankly at him. "The others will die for what they did," he told her. She nodded dispassionately. He walked up beside her and leaned to embrace her, but she shrank away, refusing to look at him. "I am not going to hurt you," he pleaded.

Mairona's newly imposed self-control was starting to slip again. She had come to depend on Kelson so much in such a short time, a dependence she never before believed she would find possible. To have found him, then come so close to losing him again under these circumstances was just too much to cope with. She would rather die.

"What if they had succeeded?" she asked him, her voice catching in her throat. Kelson replied without a pause.

"I would still love you."

"Loved me right into a convent," she said softly, working very hard to keep her voice under control.

"No," Kelson replied forcefully. "I would marry you, regardless of what they did."

"If you got me with child, there would always be questions of who fathered it."

"Then we would wait, until there was no question of you being with child," he answered immediately.

"And if I were after tonight?" She sat stiffly, a contorted statue.

"Then we would wait to marry until it was born. If it lived, it would be raised as you saw fit, provided it would not supercede our own children."

"That would cause a few problems at court." she sniffled.

"Damn the court!" he muttered. "I will have you to wife."

She finally raised her eyes to his face. His eyes were wet, too, and his words were sincere. He wouldn't have abandoned her. Throwing her arms around his waist, she buried her head in his stomach and released all the sobs that were choking her breath. She was finally safe, and in the arms of someone who loved her enough to take her, violated or no. Without letting her go, Kelson looked behind him to hook another stool with his toe, then pulled it over to sit next to her. Settling down at her level, he held her wordlessly as she cried. All of her considerable self-control was gone, her shields crumbled, so he wrapped his mind around hers in soothing, loving warmth and moved in to blur the night's memory.

He saw the incident through her eyes, from tripping over her skirts to the frightening revelation that Mahon was a Torenthi spy, who held no allegiance to the Crown of Gwynedd and who would quite easily have killed her if the purpose suited him. Then the heart-pounding fear, the horror of what was happening to her, and the utter hopelessness of her life if no one rescued her. Kelson's rage rose as he watched her beaten to the ground in that dark alley. He hoped desperately that Morgan had been able to gain some knowledge from the dead man's mind, to see if this incident had been ordered by Mahael. Moving past all that, reading what he could without upsetting her any further, he gently dulled the memory and the terror that accompanied it. Slowly, Mairona spent all her sobs and looked up at him, her eyes red and swollen over dirt-streaked cheeks and a bruised mouth. She was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

"Thank you," she whispered, pulling a few strands of hair out of her face. Kelson squeezed her gently.

"I thank God you are safe," he whispered back.

"Thanks to you," she sniffled. "If they had succeeded, I would have lost all honor." A choked sob caught in her throat.

"Not in my eyes," Kelson insisted. "I had to read the memories of a rape before, when I was at war against Meara. So-called Prince Ithel Quinnell led his men in pillage on St. Brigid's, and few of the nuns were spared. It is a hateful act, and one for which the lady should not be condemned." A haunted look came on Kelson's face as he remembered what Princess Janniver of Llannedd had suffered at Ithel's own hands that day. That had been horrible, but this was worse, even though Mahon hadn't succeeded. This was someone he cared about very deeply. Mairona touched his face, comforted that he really did understand.

"I love you, Kelson."

He carefully cradled her, secretly thrilling at the words she had just spoken for the first time. "I love you, too," he smiled back, smoothing her hair. "Just remind me to never make you angry. I think you might have broken poor Dhugal's nose."

Angry fire leapt into Mairona's eyes. "You would defend him after what he insinuated?" she spat, pulling away.

"He did not know you were alone. He believed Seánin had accompanied you, and was concerned for his safety as well," he explained.

"Oh," she said, surprised and embarrassed at her mistake. Of all the people she could offend at court, the king's blood brother was not the best place to start. "I broke his nose? And after he Healed me. Oh, no. He is going to hate me!" She shook her head, trying not to cry again as she wondered just what else could go wrong in one night.

"Do not fret about him. I am certain Dhugal is perfectly capable of Healing himself, and once the misunderstanding is explained to him he will forgive you. If he does not, I shall throw him down a garderobe." Kelson leaned forward to kiss her cheek, then pulled her back into his arms.

"Will he forgive me enough to heal the hand that broke his nose?" Mairona ventured, attempting to return Kelson's slight humor. She held out her right hand gingerly, showing Kelson how her fingers were swelling.

"If he does not, we shall just have to press Morgan or Duncan into service. Are you recovered enough to return to the castle? Apparently I need to start investigating the guard." The thought of how many other Torenthi spies could have infiltrated the Rhemuth guard sent chills up Kelson's spine. He was almost certain none were in his personal guard, but that was little comfort.

"I will be fine," she sniffled, wiping her eyes and nose on her cloak. "I was just so frightened, Kelson. I've never been so terrified in my life, never had so much to lose..."

"Neither have I," he confessed. "I would rather face a Torenthi army against overwhelming odds than watch a dagger placed to your throat."

"Do not say that," she whispered. "Then you would not be able to come to my rescue, and you most likely would not come home to me."

"I have no intention of letting Mahael keep me away from you for too long," he smiled. "Now, shall we leave before we overstay our welcome? I need your help in the morn to interview the guards, if you feel up to it."

Mairona nodded agreement. "God help the Torenthi bastards I find," she spat. "But right now, I just want to go back to the keep." She wasn't quite alright yet, but she had regained a solid control of herself and wanted to get back to her room so she could fall asleep and hopefully escape this all-too-eventful night. Kelson stood, adjusting his cloak around his shoulders, then did the same for Mairona when she rose from her stool. Moving to the fireplace, he roused the brother and thanked him for his generosity. The old monk followed them out, securing the door behind them.

Brother Peter watched the pair very carefully on the way down to the cathedral, concerned about the lady's well-being. She seemed much better, and the king was being very gentle and protective of her. That was good. But he caught a glance of the king's face as he turned to genuflect to the ciborium, and a shudder overtook the good brother when he saw Kelson's eyes. They were hard and steely, coldly determined as they contemplated the task in front of him. May God have mercy on whoever caused the expression in those eyes.