

✠ Chapter 18 ✠

Morgan roughly forced the last of the four men to the floor as Mairona smiled to herself, seeing that they looked as completely terrified as she had been the night before. They were dead men, for the king himself had witnessed their crime against his bride-to-be, making this trial a mere formality for the sake of the king's justice. Kelson leaned forward to address the court, fury sparking in his eyes.

"My lords, last night a most grievous crime was committed. These men forcibly took the Baroness of Druimfada from the cathedral square and attempted to dishonor her. Using her Deryni powers, the baroness called to us for help. We arrived before any harm could be done, but their intentions were clear. Their leader was identified as a Torenthi spy. He died last night for his crime.

"Now," the king turned to the prisoners, holding each man in turn under his steely gaze. His voice was low, but it carried to the far corners of the great hall. "Tell us why you tried to rape our chosen bride."

The men covered under his eyes, all silent. Morgan prodded the first one with the tip of his boot. "Answer the king." The man looked at the Deryni duke fearfully, then turned back to the king.

"What is your name?" Kelson asked.

"Phadrig, Sire," the man replied, voice trembling. His eyes were fixed on the first step of the dais, not daring to look up at the king or his bride, the previous night's victim.

"Are you another Torenthi spy, like Mahon?" Kelson narrowed his eyes, the look that seemed to pierce its way through to a man's soul. Phadrig must have felt the glare, for even though he didn't lift his gaze, he shuddered.

"No, Sire," he whispered.

"Did you know Mahon was a spy?"

"No, Sire."

"Did you know he was a traitor to the Crown?"

"No, Sire."

The king leaned back in his throne. "Then why did you try to dishonor not only a member of our court, but your future queen as well?"

"We did not know who she was!" the man exclaimed, pleading.

"Is that supposed to excuse your actions?"

"No, Sire." It escaped from the man's lips with a sob.

Kelson questioned each man similarly. The answers were all the same. They did not know Mahon was a spy, they were drunk, they did not know who Mairona was in their stupor. She had only been a nameless pretty girl ripe for the taking, and they had been searching for pretty girls.

"Can you give us any reason why we should not hang the lot of you?" Kelson asked without expression. All four men turned their faces down to the floor. What could they say? They were dead

whether they replied or not. "Well, then," Kelson continued, turning to Mairona. "My lady, do you have anything to say for them?"

"For them?" she replied contemptuously. "They tried to steal my honor. I will certainly not plead for mercy."

Kelson had the prisoners removed to his withdrawing room so Duncan could hear their final confession and perform Last Rites. From the corner of his eye he could see Mairona fidgeting. *How are you?* he sent to her.

I want to see the deed completed and be done with it, she replied, meeting his eyes. *Then I will have peace.*

Will you? Do you enjoy sending men to their deaths? he returned, examining her closely.

Men like this lot, aye. However, I am not sending them to the hangman's noose, for I am merely their accuser. You are the king, and it must be you who condemns them. She turned her glance back to the court, spine erect in pride.

"It is a weighty thing to take a man's life," he whispered to her.

"I know," she said softly, lowering her eyes,. "but if it were in the best interests of my people, or those whom I love, I would do it again. As will you, for it is your duty."

"You need not remind me of my duty!" he whispered harshly as his look turned hard. Mairona met his stare, refusing to let him intimidate her again. Her reply was worded humbly, but her voice suggested steel.

"Forgive me, my lord. I did not intend to presume to remind you of your responsibilities. I was merely stating that we both have similar obligations to our people. You told me to stand tall, so do not criticize me for doing so now."

"We are both strained," Kelson replied, his eyes softening. "Let us not lash out at each other."

"Agreed, my lord."

Duncan reentered with the condemned men at that point. "Have they made their peace with God?" Kelson asked.

"Yes, Sire," Duncan said. "They are prepared to die."

"Very well. The weather is too harsh for an outdoor execution, so the sentence will be carried out in here." Looking up to the guards in his gallery, Kelson motioned to them. The lords and ladies crowding the hall gasped collectively as ropes were tossed over the rafters, falling down before the dais. Guards moved each of the four men under one of the nooses and fitted it around their necks. Mairona had to repress a small smile. They had been willing to kill her, and now they were being sent to their deaths. It was fitting.

"My lady!" Phadrig called, locking eyes onto her. "My Lady of Druimfada, forgive me my wrongs!"

The urge to smile disappeared as Mairona's mouth opened in surprise at his plea. Why did he have to ask for something she couldn't give? Why couldn't he have gone to his death in silence instead of showing some pale semblance of nobility with the rope around his neck?

"My lady?" Kelson asked quietly, turning to her.

"Do it!" she responded just as quietly, lowering her eyes to the floor. After a few deep breaths she tried to lift her gaze to the four men about to die.

"Guards!" Kelson called to the gallery, and the men were hoisted off the ground. Their faces turned blue almost immediately as three of the men thrashed wildly, trying in vain to escape the rope cutting off their life's breath. Phadrig, however, seemed resigned to his fate, and barely moved until his body started to twitch involuntarily. Kelson watched them until he was sure they were dead, but Mairona found she couldn't. Phadrig's remorse made her unable to watch him die, and so she never saw his body fall still. After a few minutes it was all over, but she hadn't found the peace she expected.

Afterwards Kelson and his inner circle retreated into the royal apartments, looking grim after the day's proceedings. "I have a headache," Kelson complained as he removed the crown from his head, handing it to Dolfin. Ivo, the other squire, worked quickly to distribute refreshments. Kelson drank from his wine deeply.

Mairona removed her court cloak, which was too warm and stiff in this smaller room. "Sit down," she told the king, pulling a stool in front of her.

"I have been sitting for too long," he muttered, rubbing his forehead.

"As you wish, but I shall not do anything about your headache unless you sit. I cannot reach you up there."

Flashing a short grin, Kelson sank gratefully into the stool. Mairona began kneading his shoulders which were so stiff they might as well have been made of stone. She started working out the knots with surprising strength, using a little Deryni administration when necessary, and he sighed in pleasure. "Oh, I love you," he purred. She just smiled, centering in on a sore spot.

"That is rather obvious after today," Morgan said, pulling up a stool to one side of the king. Duncan and Dhugal settled facing the others as Morgan continued. "I wish you would have told me you were going to make her a baroness."

"I only decided myself just before I entered the hall," Kelson replied, starting to go limp. "It occurred to me that officially the Dugains have been untitled. I cannot have a bride from an untitled family, even if they do bear royal blood." He smiled up at Mairona.

Duncan cleared his throat. "Did you consider how your lords would receive this? Some of them will not be happy."

"What valid reason do they have to object?" Kelson asked. "I did not grant her any land she does not already legally hold, and the Dugains have been styling themselves barons ever since the old Mearan sovereign gave them the title. It was Tiernan's right to pass the title on to his daughter according to Mearan law. The word 'Baroness' is not going to give her any more power, and the title will pass on to our sons."

"Try to see this from their human eyes, Sire," Duncan responded. "A relatively unknown Deryni lady comes to court for the first time. Within a week this unknown will be their queen. She is allowed to sit in on a council meeting. She is made baroness against Gwyneddi law. That will upset many men."

Mairona sighed, irritated. *They speak of me as if I am not even present*, she sent Kelson.

He reached up, smiling, and touched her arm to still her. She continued massaging his shoulders as he addressed his advisors' concerns. "Mairona will make a very capable queen, as I am sure you will both agree. Why should I not honor her when she is deserving? I am confident the two

of you can assuage my lords' fears." Kelson smiled to himself at how easily he had turned his advisors' complaint back on them. By now he was well on his way to being completely relaxed, and leaned back on Mairona with a sigh.

"Feeling better?" she asked without stopping.

"Mmmmmmm," he agreed. "But there is work to be done. Interviewing the entire guard will take days. I would like to see those men not on duty assembled in the hall. Morgan, we will need Richenda's help, and yours as well, Duncan. I intend to use all the trusted Deryni I have at my disposal. Mairona and I shall join you shortly. Ivo, Dolfin, you may withdraw to another room."

They all prepared to leave, Duncan looking agitated. As a relatively unknown factor, Mairona was becoming too involved too quickly in the workings of the court for one so recently called a traitor, and the king didn't seem terribly concerned. Hopefully he would become more objective soon.

The object of Duncan's unease rested her hands on Kelson's shoulders. "My lord Dhugal?" she called, stopping the young duke.

"Aye, my lady?"

Mairona shifted awkwardly, lightly clutching her betrothed. "Last night I said and did things I should not have, that I would not in my right mind. Will you forgive me?"

"Aye," he grinned, rubbing his now-healed face. "'Tis not often I have my nose broken by such a lovely lady. You have a fist hard enough to be the pride of any borderer! Kelson explained what happened, and threatened to toss me in the middens if I held a grudge."

"I would do it, too," Kelson chuckled.

"I am terribly sorry." Mairona looked down at the top of Kelson's head for a moment. "I should not have lost control."

"Neither should any of us, but we do at times. All of us. Why, I could tell you some stories about my dear brother Kel—"

"Do not frighten her off before the wedding!" the king grinned, reaching up to grasp her hands.

"At the wedding feast, then!" Dhugal joked, then turned serious. "Mairona, when Kel and I were children, we swore a blood oath of brotherhood. That bond is as strong if not stronger than if we shared family blood. When you marry, you will become my sister. What brother and sister have not had their misunderstandings?"

Smiling timidly, Mairona ducked her head. "You honor me, my lord."

"As long as you honor my brother and king, I have no quarrel with you." Dhugal took a step forward to give Mairona a brotherly kiss on the cheek, then turned to Kelson. "Do not take too long with your ladylove. I will only do so much of your dirty work while you dally up here alone. Some may question what you are doing."

Kelson laughed. "We shall be along too soon for anyone to suspect any impiety. Now leave." He gave Dhugal a shove toward the door.

"Such reward for faithful service," Dhugal muttered, flashing a grin as he opened the door. Kelson threw his goblet at Dhugal, but he was quick enough to jump through the door and use it as a shield. After the crash of metal hitting wood and the slosh of wine spilling on the flagstones, he

cracked open the door again and stuck his head through. "You really should practice with your arms master more, Kel. That was a slow arm."

"Would you prefer to have another broken nose?" Kelson flexed his fingers threatening. "I could have Mairona take a swing at you again."

"Nah, I like it the way it is," Dhugal returned, closing the door. He was finally gone, but Ivo and Dolfin had come rushing in at the disturbance.

"Tis alright," Kelson told them. "We will take care of this." The two boys turned around and exited, unfazed by Kelson and Dhugal's play. Mairona sighed as they left, grabbing a towel from the fireplace hearth. She moved to the door and picked up the now-dented goblet, but Kelson took the towel away before she could clean up the spilled wine. "This is my mess," he told her, squatting to soak up the red Fianna not absorbed by the floor rushes.

"The mighty King of Gwynedd mops floors as well as any serving girl," she teased, settling next to him. He flicked the towel at her, sending little droplets of wine flying. "My dress!" she cried in mock horror, inspecting the tiny red dots now flecking the front.

"As if you cannot have another made." Kelson finished cleaning up the floor and tossed the towel close to the fire, where it could dry. "How are you?"

"I am fine," she replied, smiling. He reached out to touch her cheek, examining her seriously.

"Be honest."

Her smile vanished as she grasped his hand, pulling it from her cheek to rest in her lap enveloped by her own fingers. "It would be a lot easier if that man had not asked forgiveness."

"I know." He enveloped her in his arms, surrounding her with warmth and love. "I am assigning a personal guard to you. From now on, you are not to leave the keep without them."

"Life under siege," she sighed. "Being your queen is becoming less and less desirable."

Kelson frowned, pulling away to look at her. "You still want to, do you not? I mean—" He was silenced with a kiss.

"Aye, I still want to marry you. I love you, and if this is the price I must pay, so be it. I am merely saying this is why you never saw me among the parade of maidens vying for your attention." She leaned back toward him, settling in his arms again. "Well. May I at least choose the men who will be trailing my every step?"

Resting his head on her shoulder, Kelson stared thoughtfully at the fire for a moment. "For certes you want the men you brought from Druimfada," he said finally.

"And I am certain you want more than five men," she returned.

"I would like at least ten until things with Torenth calm down. Morgan could not Read anything from Mahon last night, so I do not know if he was acting under orders. If so, someone else may try to harm you again." He glanced down at his finger that had once worn the ring intended as Sidana's wedding band. "I will not lose you, too," he whispered, barely audible. Mairona brought her hand over the finger, brushing at his mind.

"Of course we cannot know what God's will is, but I fully intend to live a long life with you, Kelson."

He smiled, holding her tightly. "I pray that is God's will. 'Tis certainly mine." He held her close, breathing in the smell of roses that seemed to linger in her hair. She stirred in his arms, craning around to face him.

"May I pick my own men? I will be able to examine them closely this afternoon," she asked again. He thought for a while.

"Let me know whom you select," he finally complied. "I shall review them later, and decide if they are appropriate."

"Alright," she said, breaking free to stand. "Shall we go, then? You did promise Dhugal we would be along shortly, and I hate to make a liar of you."

Kelson rose lightly, taking her hand to kiss it affectionately. "As my beloved lady wishes," he smiled, opening the door.

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Liam had wedged himself between two storehouses in the outer ward, nearly chuckling to himself at the fright he would give Kelson's cousin Payne when he passed by on his way to the stables. The tables were turned, however, when a hand unexpectedly touched his shoulder from the shadowed darkness behind. He couldn't even let out a decent scream, for a hand clamped over his mouth.

"Forgive me, my king," the man whispered in his ear, using the Torenthi tongue. "If I am discovered, much will be lost."

You will unhand us! Liam shot back psychically. The man was likely Deryni, for he released the boy. "What is the meaning of this?" Liam hissed, turning to peer into the darkness. He could barely make out dim shadow-features of a man in Haldane guard livery.

"I am a sworn man of my lord's uncle Mahael, Duke of Arjenol. I was sent here with others to keep watch over you, and work toward the day you may be freed and returned to your people. Regrettably, one of my comrades acted in a most unfortunate manner the past eve, and now all our labor is for naught." He paused, reaching into a pouch on his belt.

"How many of our uncle's agents are in Rhemuth?" Liam demanded.

"Including myself, six now that Mahon is dead," the Torenthi replied, withdrawing two items. He offered one—a wrapped package. "This is a gift from my master, to demonstrate his faith and the hope that you will soon be returned to your rightful home."

Liam took the package and unwrapped the bundled cotton, revealing a gold ring with a silver boss surrounding a leaping hart of black lacquer—the royal arms of Torenth. He touched the cool metal, and thought that it somehow felt odd.

"Long life to Lajos II, may he shine like the sun over Torenth!" The man took his second item, a clay vial, and pulled out its stopper. Liam tried to stop him as he lifted it to his lips, but a twelve-year-old boy was no match for a grown warrior. The contents went down, and Liam fled his enclosure, knowing that the man would soon die.

There was another hiding place he and Payne had used before, in the gallery at St. Hilary's. Liam ran for the church on the other side of the outer ward, clutching the wrapped ring tightly in his right hand. Just inside the portico was a stair that wound up the square, Romanesque bell tower to the gallery overlooking the nave below. It was almost always dark if he kept to the outer walls, and no one had ever disturbed him or Payne. Sitting in a deeply shadowed crevice, he regulated his breathing and quickly brought himself to trance.

Suitably prepared, he unwrapped the ring again and placed a finger on it, examining the metal by more than just physical means. *Uncle, you think you will use this to spy on me? Your stamp is clumsy here, unlike you. Did you think I would not be properly trained? You cannot fool me, I know you covet my throne.* Frowning slightly, Liam unbound Mahael's spell from the ring and re-wrapped it in its cloth. Blinking, he came out of trance.

Kelson must know of the dead Torenti man between the storehouses, and the six that remained to be discovered. The ring, however, Liam decided to keep for himself now that it was harmless. It would stand as a reminder of the deceit and treachery he was likely to encounter when Kelson helped him claim his crown.