

## ✠ Chapter 26 ✠

It had been an unseasonably warm night after such a harsh winter, and the curtains were pulled back on the royal bed for some cooler air. That also let the sun in, waking Kelson with the tolling of St. Hilary's bells. Yawning, he thought about all that needed to be done at the last minute and knew he should already be out of bed, but then he turned his head and glanced at Mairona, apparently still held in the restless grip of last night's slumber. It would be weeks, perhaps months, before he could wake with her at his side again. There was also the unpleasant possibility that this summer would claim his life, and this would be the last time. Rolling onto his side, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close.

She wasn't really asleep, though her eyes were closed, and she nestled into the crook of his arm. Both of them lay together, refusing to think about the day ahead or even admit they were no longer gripped by the world of dreams. Kelson groaned when he heard Dolfin stir, padding softly to the huge state bed to rouse his master.

"Sire?" the boy asked quietly.

"I am awake, Dolfin," he replied, taking his arm back to rub his eyes.

"We both are," Mairona griped. She rolled onto her side to look at her husband, who was staring miserably at the top of the canopy.

"So it all begins," he muttered sleepily.

"Not if I do not let you up." With a huge yawn, Mairona pushed herself on top of Kelson, trying to pin him down. He chuckled as she snuggled her face into his neck.

"And then what happens?" he asked, stroking her hair. "I lose my kingdom to Mahael and you lose your lands to Rolf."

"Do you have to be so damned practical this early in the morning?" Mairona grumbled, flipping herself to land on the feather mattress.

Placing his finger on her mouth, Kelson clucked his tongue in disapproval. "Watch your language, love. You sound like a soldier."

"I was raised by soldiers."

Smiling, Kelson kissed her. She wrapped her arms around him, trying to draw him more firmly under the covers, but he gently disengaged himself and swung his legs over the edge of the mattress. Dolfin was waiting with an open robe, which he placed over Kelson's shoulders. Yawning profusely, Mairona pushed herself out of bed and took her dressing gown from Ivo. Shrugging it on, she took Kelson's hand.

"I will see you at Mass," he said gently. "We both need to dress."

"Aye," she replied with a catch in her voice. Kelson embraced her, squeezing her affectionately as he wrapped his mind around hers.

*Do not cry, a stóirín,* he told her. *Not yet.*

*I will try,* she sniffled, then pulled away and left through the solar door, unable to speak or even look back.

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Most of her ladies were already dressed themselves, having risen before daybreak. Mairona took perverse momentary comfort in the fact that Ailín looked even more wretched than she felt, and Richenda was letting her anxiety show as well. Very few words were spoken as they helped their queen with her clothes and Gwenhwyfar styled her hair. Mairona had chosen to wear a dark gray gown that matched her mood, though she had Gwen leave her hair mostly unbound, as Kelson preferred. Once she was deemed presentable, the ladies left together for the castle's main chapel.

Archbishop Cardiel said the mass that would see Gwynedd's lords off to war. Most of the women were standing closer to husbands and loved ones than was seemly, but the aging bishop cast a sympathetic eye on all, knowing not all the men present would be returning. The queen in particular leaned heavily on her husband when they were required to stand, looking as if she were becoming ill. When the celebration was over, people filed out, solemn and unusually quiet. The stair from the chapel resounded noisily with the chinking and clanging of armor, but the usual din of voices was uncomfortably absent.

"I must meet with my generals one last time," Kelson told Mairona as they walked through the door. "I shall not see you until we all assemble in the courtyard."

"Come to my rooms first, please," she begged him.

"There is not time," he shook his head. "We leave in less than an hour."

"It will only take a moment, Kelson. I have something to give you," she told him, then switched to mind-speech. *Besides, you will have the whole blasted summer to meet with your generals.*

*My. Grumpy, are we?* "All right, but only a moment," he said aloud.

The solar was almost deserted, with all the women assisting their husbands, brothers, and fathers down in the hall. Mairona drew Kelson through the room to her quarters, where she knelt and opened a wooden chest carved with Druimfada's tower. Gently she pulled out a heap of red cloth, then closed the lid and stood. A flick of her wrist made the cloth wave in the air and unfold itself to show a richly decorated mantle. A large cloth-of-gold lion was the centerpiece, embroidered lovingly and framed with a border of Haldane lions around the hem. "I have been working on this since we were betrothed, knowing you would have to leave this summer," she told him, holding it out. "There are some protective spells I placed with the needlework that should help keep you safe."

Taking a handful, Kelson examined it closely. He turned it over, and on the backside were the mirror images of the lions stitched on front of almost the same quality. Extending his mind, he could feel the faint trace of the spell she had stitched in gold. "This is beautiful work," he told her, meaning more than just the stitches.

"Thank you," she said simply, as he started to undo the buckles holding his mantle in place. Mairona took the old cloth as it fell, throwing it on top of the chest, then helped Kelson buckle the new one in place.

"I hope it will return in as good a condition," he told her, adjusting it so it fell comfortably from his shoulders.

"I do not care if it gets ripped into a hundred pieces and trampled in the mud, as long as you return unscathed," she told him. He looked into her eyes, green pools of anguish that were just about to cry. Wrapping his arms around her, he rocked her for a few moments, resting his lips in her sweet-smelling rose-scented hair.

"God willing, there is nothing that will keep me from coming back to you," he promised, kissing her forehead.

"God willing," she repeated. "What if He isn't?"

"I shall wait for you until He reunites us for all eternity. Then we can never be parted."

"Assuming we are both sinners or saints," she smiled, trying to lighten the mood. "You had better see to your generals and keep them in line."

He grinned, thinking how grouchy the older men were when they got as little sleep as he had. "Aye. Will you be in the hall?"

"I am not letting you out of my sight until you ride through the castle gate."

"Well, then. Shall we go?" He took her hand and together they walked down the steps to the great hall, where all the military leaders were grouping.

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During the short meeting, Mairona fidgeted on the other side of the hall. She wanted to be at Kelson's side, not yards away with the ladies. In Druimfada, she would be at the table with the men. Not that she envied what any of them had to do in the coming weeks, but her father had never dismissed her with the women and she didn't enjoy Kelson doing it. Nigel was with him, and he wasn't going away with the army. *It will not always be like this*, she told herself. *This summer, if I can prove myself capable, I will not be sent to my needlework next time.*

Wood scraped harshly against the floor, rousing her from her thoughts. The men were rising, getting ready to gather in the courtyard. Kelson remained behind, speaking with Prince Nigel as he motioned Mairona to join them. She hurried as quickly as was seemly.

"Mairí, I have one last favor to ask you." He put his hand on her shoulder with a sad smile.

"Anything," she answered, her eyes shining with love and anxiety.

"The potential for Haldane powers was set in my uncle the last time I went to war. If the need should arise, I would like you, Duncan, and Richenda to confirm him in those powers. He should not wait until Alaric and Dhugal return from war, if they are able to return."

Mairona gulped, her heart thudding as she realized exactly what situation would make that necessary. The Haldane powers had been discovered by St. Camber, part of the divine right passed from one king to the next, Deryni-like abilities that awoke in full-powered glory around the time of coronation with Deryni assistance. "I would do it," she replied in a choked whisper, "though, Uncle, forgive me, I would not like it one bit."

"Neither would I," Nigel added. "Being regent is as close to being king as I want to get."

"Hopefully it will not be necessary," Kelson said with a grin that was meant to be reassuring. It failed.

"Show me how it must be done," Mairona told him, smoothly opening the link that was so effortless between them.

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Kelson had Mairona on his arm when they entered the courtyard. His generals were milling about, but the senior knights were all mounted in formation. He knew the army would be in similar

readiness outside the city walls. Young Liam was already mounted next to Kelson's waiting warhorse, splendid in the livery of a royal Haldane squire, both excited at his first war and anxious about riding against his people. He was Kelson's advantage, for would the Torenthi fight wholeheartedly against their king? Ewan of Claibourne's voice barked over the din for the Haldane Lancers to salute the king when he appeared at the top of the steps to the great hall. Kelson raised his hand in acknowledgment, smiling down at his men before turning to his wife.

"Tis time," he said sadly, taking both her hands,

"I know." The tears she had been holding back all morning finally looked like they were going to spill over. He pulled her close, holding her one last time and stroking her hair.

"*Mo ghrá thú,*" he whispered in her tongue. "Always remember."

"I love you, too," she returned in his, beginning to weep openly. "Come back to me."

"As God wills." He pulled away, and Mairona brushed at her tears.

There was one last, bittersweet kiss for farewell. The men cheered, for Mairona had proven to be popular among the soldiers and knights. Taking one last look at her agonized eyes, he turned to walk down the steps to the mount Dhugal was holding for him. Rising in the saddle, he kned the white charger to stand at the head of the Lancers.

"Spears up!" Kelson's voice carried easily over the courtyard, and as one the knights raised their lances high. "To the queen! *Salute!*"

Mairona smiled through her tears as the ashen poles dipped to the ground. Kelson kned his charger to face her, then drew the Haldane sword and held it up in his own hail. Waving, she wondered how many of those wonderful men would return in the end. "Keep my husband safe," she whispered as Kelson sheathed the sword and started leading the march out of the city. Only once he had disappeared through the gate did she turn to see Richenda and Ailín standing behind her, both looking as forlorn as she did.

"Richenda, does this ever get any easier?" she asked, wiping her tears away.

"No," the duchess shook her head. "Never. You never stop fearing that this time he will not come back."

Throwing their arms around each other, the three women went back up to the solar where they could cry on each other's shoulders.