

✘ Chapter 30 ✘

Mairona trotted in the gate to Rhemuth Castle's inner ward, her ladies and guards fanning out behind her as they were surrounded by pages and squires come to assist. "Good ride today, Stoirm," she smiled, patting her mare's neck. It was the same white palfrey Kelson had given her for their wedding, a spirited but well-behaved horse.

"Good ride?" Richenda chuckled, motioning an older squire to assist her from the saddle. "I will not be able to walk straight for a week."

"Then I suppose you do not want to go out again tomorrow?" Mairona laughed, then handed the reins over to a page before lighting to the ground.

"Not even if you order my presence," Richenda grimaced, gingerly testing her legs with a few small steps.

"Your Highness!" a voice called across the courtyard. Mairona turned and saw Ailín flying down the stair from the great hall. "Your Highness! News from the king! Wonderful news!"

"What? What has happened?" Hiking her skirts, Mairona ran to meet Ailín on the stair as Richenda struggled to keep up.

"His Highness has contacted Father Duncan! Torenth is defeated! The army is heading for Meara!"

"And the casualties after the final battle?" Mairona asked, grabbing Ailín's arm.

"None that we are concerned about," the girl grinned. "A messenger will arrive with the official news in a few days."

Mairona let out a very un-queenly whoop as she rushed past Ailín into the hall. "Where is Duncan?" she asked breathlessly.

"He returned to St. Hilary's," Ailín replied, rushing to catch up.

"Oh." Stopping suddenly, Mairona whirled around to go right back out the door, but Richenda and Ailín were blocking the way in their haste to keep pace with their queen. Mairona took them both in an embrace, nearly dancing in her happiness. "'Tis over and everyone is safe!" she laughed. "Our husbands are safe!" Letting them go, she pushed her way between them and ran down the stairs for St. Hilary's.

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The messenger came a week later, bringing official news and personal correspondence from a husband to his wife. After reading it all, Mairona burst in Nigel's quarters brandishing a rolled-up missive in her hand. He looked up at her affectionately, having grown very fond of her and her sudden entrances. They always provided a break in the monotony of his regent duties, and alleviated her own boredom as well. Nigel had done his best to include her as much as he could, but she bristled at the role she was given in her husband's absence. No, that wasn't quite right. It was the lack of a role that seemed to goad her.

This afternoon she wore a plain, well-made dress in the unassuming style she preferred since his nephew departed. Nigel mused that there was no one's head to turn in his absence. "Uncle," she greeted breathlessly. "How many men can you spare?"

"Well, lass, that would depend on what you intend to do with them," he smiled as he kissed her cheek in welcome.

"I mean to go for a short journey."

"Oh?" Nigel's brow furrowed. What could have prompted this and where did she think she was going? He had a disconcerting idea.

"Do not worry, Uncle, I am not running off to attempt heroics in Druimfada. That is Kelson's task, not mine."

He visibly settled at that. "I would not be surprised if you tried," he grinned. "Where do you have in mind?"

She dropped the parchment in front of him. "This just arrived from Kelson. By now he will be only two days' journey from here."

That stunned Nigel. Mairona was daring, and his nephew indulgent, but a queen in a war camp on the march? "He sent for you, then?"

"Ah, no. He does not know I am coming." She held his gaze with fierce determination, expecting the resistance that must follow.

"I am sorry, Mairona, I cannot allow this. Kelson would never forgive me if something happened to you on the way." He noticed her composure hadn't faltered, and braced himself for her willfulness.

"Uncle, Kelson is just a short distance away, coming from a victorious finish in Torenth and still several week's march from the danger in Druimfada. We were married but a month before he left, and you know how he feels about me. Do you truly think he would be angry at my arrival?"

She would have to do better than that. "Not angry at you, dear, but he would be displeased with me for exposing you to the bandits, robbers, and worse that come out from cover when war breaks. My answer is still no."

Apparently there was still something up her sleeve, because she was unruffled and even took a step forward. "I intend to go, Uncle, with or without your approval. Only Kelson may bid me stay, and he is not here. Now, which would make him angrier—you allowing me to go with sufficient escort, or letting me slip away alone and unprotected?" She stared at him defiantly, already knowing she had won.

"God help my nephew," he shook his head. "I shall pick you thirty knights and soldiers."

The smile she gave him was radiant as she kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Uncle. You are ever so kind."

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The storms had started within an hour after Mairona's party cleared Rhemuth's walls the subsequent morn. Riding through the rain was never an enjoyable prospect, and Saraid had been grumbling all day that impossible road conditions were a sign from God proving Mairona was out of her mind. Indeed, the horses made little headway as they sank in over a foot of mud until Mairona ordered her party off the road. The rolling plain was still soggy, but the horses didn't falter as much in the grass. Although she wouldn't admit it, she was even more miserable than Saraid. This whole journey had been Mairona's idea though, and she would be damned if anyone discovered she was starting to think embroidery in the solar wasn't so boring after all. Only the thought of seeing Kelson again maintained her resolve.

At least Ailín thrilled at the adventure, and the escort guards Nigel sent with them weren't bothered, as knights and soldiers were accustomed to marching through even the worst weather. By the following day Mairona was certain they thought the whole thing amusing. What queen had ever left the safety of Rhemuth keep for a war camp, even for a night's tryst? Little did they know her true reasons—

As they crested a hill, another gust of wind blew her cloak's hood off. Its strength and suddenness took her breath away.

"Madam!" Ailín cried, pointing. "My lady Mairona, I see the camp!"

Standing in the leather loops that served as stirrups, she followed Ailín's finger. There were tents down in the valley, and the motion of milling soldiers could be seen even from their height. "By Brigid, I believe you are right!" *And about time, too*, she added silently. "Well, ladies, I do believe that promises warmth and a dry bed!"

"But my lady, 'tis yet early afternoon!" Ailín protested with a grin.

"Aye, and I for one am absolutely exhausted!" Mairona returned with a wicked grin. "If you would rather tour the camp with Dhugal until dark, that is your doing."

Said Dhugal's new bride gave a twittering laugh, then stifled a pretend yawn. "Ah, me, but I do seem to be tired after all."

"I thought as much." Then without warning, Mairona set her heels to her mare's flank and plunged dangerously fast into the valley.

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Euliss stood sentry on the west side of camp, as bored as the rest of the army since the rain had kept them from marching out that morning. If the past two days had been any indication, it would be some time yet before they could move out. His musings vanished when he saw a party of riders appear over the hill, and he cried warning to his fellow soldiers. Swiftly, a company gathered by the time the unknown arrivals started moving into the valley, and they all held their breath to a man as one rider plummeted at insane speed down the slippery slope. Euliss thought surely that man was favored by heaven, because the horse never faltered. Then the figure got close enough for him to see that "man" wore a woman's skirts.

"Sweet holy Mother of God!" he exclaimed as his fellow soldiers looked at each other with grins. They had finally seen the colors the escort guard were carrying, a joining of the Haldane lion with Druimfada's tower, showing it could only be the queen.

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In the middle of the camp, Morgan entered his young king's tent with carefully controlled dignity. Dhugal and Ewan were seated around Kelson, the most uncomfortable parts of their armor laying in scattered pieces, and they had been there long enough to drain at least one goblet of wine each. The squire Ivo tried valiantly to pick up after them and make sure his master was served wine and food when necessary, but he appeared to be fighting a losing battle.

"Forgive me, my lord," Morgan said as he bowed his head in greeting.

"What took you, Alaric?" the king asked, sliding over to make room for the new arrival.

"I had to escort some unusual visitors." With that, Alaric could contain his composure no longer and his face split into a huge grin. The trio seated around the low table at the other end blinked at each other in curiosity.

"Well?" Kelson demanded. "Who could it be? Rolf begging me for forgiveness and mercy?"

"Pity, no. I think you had better see for yourself." With great ceremony he pulled back the entry hanging. Kelson, Dhugal, and Ewan all froze in wide-eyed disbelief as the bedraggled queen and Duchess of Cassan stumbled in.

"What the devil?" Dhugal exclaimed, his face going from amazement to pure joy at the site of Ailín. Ewan's eyes laughed, knowing with one look at the travel-worn duo who had been the instigator of this. Kelson alone was unreadable as he stood.

"Dhugal, at this unexpected turn of events I am certain you will want to withdraw. Ewan, Morgan, you may retire as well."

Dhugal and Ailín, having been wed only a night before the army marched out, barely heard. He held out his arms for her to run into them, standing motionless in excited if unexpected reunion before obeying Kelson. Morgan and Ewan followed soon after, silent laughter dissolved at Kelson's voice. It sounded like the queen would not be welcomed as warmly as the duchess.

Kelson's flat, emotionless tone struck fear in Mairona's heart. Could she have misread him so badly? She had been aching for him all summer long, and in his letters he had appeared to be truly sorry to come so close to Rhemuth and yet have to pass it by. This was not at all what she expected. Uncertain, she fell back on a lifetime of court training and swooped in curtsy.

"My lord king," she murmured, looking at the toes of his filthy boots. He did not answer, and that silence fed the gnawing pit growing in her stomach. "As you had reached the safety of Gwynedd's plains, I did think to bring you cheer and keep your company for a night or two."

"A foolish maneuver. The last time I was at war, a Torenthi assassin tried to kill my uncle in Rhemuth. You have needlessly opened yourself to attack, and your little escapade has diminished the royal guard at Rhemuth."

"With Prince Nigel's approval!" she countered too quickly.

"Did you give him any choice?"

"No," she whispered, twisting at her wedding ring.

"I did not think so."

Mairona gulped audibly, her composure shredding away. She had expected his excited and pleased surprise, not this. Not this at all. "I will return to Rhemuth in the morn, when the men and horses have had their rest." Her voice caught in her throat as she forced the words out, then grew sharp. "Why are you doing this? I have longed for your company all summer and just spent two days riding through the cold and rain only to see you, to feel your embrace. The least you could do is give me a proper welcome!" When she dared to look up at him, her dejected eyes and quivering lips made him instantly regret his anger. He knelt and wrapped her close in his arms, ignoring the water and mud dripping off on him.

"Forgive me, love, I did not mean to hurt you. When we took Mahael I saw every horrible thing men can do to each other. The moment you came in here I envisioned one of Rolf's henchmen kidnapping you en route and doing each and every single one of them to you. If anything had happened—" He couldn't finish voicing the possibility.

She almost started sobbing in relief, not caring that the buckles on his brigandine hurt as he pressed her tight. "You certainly did give me a scare," she hiccupped. "I was ready to slink back to Rhemuth."

"Not until we break camp, and then you will return with a full company of my men. I truly am sorry, Mairí. Sweet *Jesu*, you are a blessed sight for battle-weary eyes."

"I wager I am a sight. I probably look worse than your foot soldiers." She laughed when he pulled a hand away, dripping with mud from her traveling cloak.

"Are you thirsty?" he asked, helping her removing her outer clothing.

"Parched," she agreed, breaking free to pour herself a goblet with watered wine. It was drained and refilled in less than a minute.

"You must have made a strange company riding here during campaign season," Kelson grinned, settling back on cushions with his own newly-remembered cup.

"You have no idea how bored I have been holed up in Rhemuth, and then Ailín was so desperate to see Dhugal that I did not have the heart to go traipsing off after you and leave her behind."

There was silence as she finished discarding her wet clothing, creating a soggy pile that oozed water onto the carpeted floor. Mairona finally dropped down on the cushions, suddenly weary from the two-day ride. As tired as she was, though, Kelson looked as if he were awake only by some blessed miracle. That, or too many fatigue-banishing spells. He almost fell when he moved to sit beside her. "You are beyond exhaustion, love," she said softly, smoothing some hair out of his tanned face.

"I am," he admitted. "Sleep has not come well in several days, even after my victory in Torenth. I expect that is why I was so sharp with you earlier."

"Even after the victory or because of it?" she wondered. He didn't answer but held her close, marveling at how well she understood him. "I could make certain you rest well tonight," she offered, placing her hand on his forehead to do just that. He pulled it away to brush it against his lips.

"That you will, but not by Deryni means." He grinned slyly, leaning over to kiss her. Even though she had stripped to her chemise in an effort to get dry, the rain had soaked her to the skin. It made the linen cling appealingly to her body. "I should get you out of that sodden rag and warm you," he said, pulling at the sopping fabric.

"Just how do you propose to finish undressing me, warm me, and get sleep, Kel?" she asked, playfully rubbing his nose.

"Do not ask me to give away my secrets that easily. Now, will my beloved queen allow me to show her to her royal pallet?" He helped her up, drawing her into an enclosure walled by tapestries.

"Aye, she will, if you also show her how to undo all that royal armor."

"With the greatest of pleasure," he replied so earnestly she couldn't help but laugh.

Kelson's intentions may have been valiant, but he was flagging so quickly that Mairona insisted on making him sleep the rest of the afternoon and all night. He didn't argue much, knowing it was for the best, and she was perfectly content to lie in his arms for that time. Mairona woke at dawn, taking care not to disturb her husband as she rose and dressed. It had finally stopped raining, but a brief consultation with Morgan and Dhugal showed that it was still too wet to move that large an army any great distance. The men needed their rest before marching on Druimfada, and this was a perfect excuse to get it. Satisfied, she returned to Kelson's tent and left orders that they were not to be disturbed for anything less than a life-or-death matter.

When she shed her outer clothing and laid back down on the small pallet they shared, Kelson stirred. Smiling, he pulled her toward him. She was still dirty and smelled like a wet horse, but he was no better off, and she was the most beautiful thing he had seen in weeks. Their physical reunion was rough and passionate, aggressive from six weeks of forced celibacy. The first time wasn't enough for either of them, and the second round was more drawn out, playful and affectionate.

Afterwards they both laid together, she half on top of him. Her finger traced the beads of sweat around his chest as she gathered the courage to say what she must. "Beloved, I have a favor to ask," she started.

"What is it?" he asked with a lazy smile.

"As Baroness of Druimfada I feel it is my duty to accompany you," she said slowly and deliberately, studying his face.

"I knew that was why you came," he chuckled, wrapping a curl of her hair around his finger. "I am not naïve enough to think it was all for me."

"Well?"

"No, *a stóirín*," he replied. "'Tis too risky."

"They are my people, and they are Mearan. I do not mean offense, but you are not."

"So I am the enemy," Kelson said evenly.

"No, Kel, I did not mean that at all. The people of Druimfada are fiercely proud to be Mearan, and will be slow to trust an outsider. I am Mearan and their liege lady. They would be more receptive to you, and more inclined to defy Rolf, if I am with you." She held her breath, watching him think.

"There is no denying what you say," he finally admitted, "but I will not risk you. I have the superior army, and taking Druimfada back is only a matter of time." He turned on his side to look at her better. "I would give you anything, Mairí, but not this. War is unspeakably horrendous, and I will not subject you to it."

"I see," she replied, "and while your siege of my invincible castle drags on for months, my imprisoned men suffer at Rolf's mercy. Kelson, unless you drug me with *merasha* and keep me locked in a guarded tower night and day until Rolf quits Druimfada, I will follow you to fulfill my duty and save my people. You have three options. You can keep me a prisoner, which I will not take to kindly. Do nothing, and I will follow you alone and unprotected. Or let me accompany you, placing me in the safety of your army."

Kelson pulled away, sitting up. "Is this what you did to my uncle?" he asked, all affection fled.

"It worked so well I thought I would try again," she chuckled, but her laughter died when she saw the deadness of his face.

"I do not accept ultimatums," he told her coldly.

"If it were Gwynedd at stake, would you do any differently?" she asked.

"No, I would not." He sighed explosively, then shook his finger in her face. "You may go, for you leave me little choice. But you will do exactly as I say when I say, or I will lock you in that tower. Is that clear?"

"Yes, I will, oh, I will. Thank you!" She pounced on him in her excitement, throwing her arms around his neck, but his body was rigid. "Kelson?" she asked, pulling away in confusion. He stood and started dressing.

"You get your way once again, Mairona, but have you honestly thought of the consequences? This is not the behavior of a proper queen, and I am not doing my duty to prevent it. There will be rumblings at court about this, and if you do not behave in an ideal manner when we return those rumblings will require my attention, which is better applied elsewhere." He fished for his tunic and finally found it. "Do not expect me to be overjoyed." The tunic somehow made it over his head, and he stalked out of the tent.

"Kelson!" she called after him, but he didn't come back. Sighing, she called Saraïd over to help her dress. She would have to find a way to make this up to him, and it would have to be good.

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Kelson sought out a green and black pennant flying over his general's tent, where the Morgan griffin flapped in the wind left from yesterday's storm. He needed a head older and wiser, one who had been married for some years. "Alaric," he called as he lifted the entrance flap.

The Deryni duke greeted his king, and soon they were seated on furs, the older man listening seriously as Kelson spoke of Mairona and her little coup. When the young king was done speaking of the morning's events, he fell silent, staring at his Ring of Fire. It all sounded so silly now, making him an incompetent fool husband who couldn't refuse his wife. "I need advice," he said finally

Morgan's silver eyes showed no amusement, and he didn't speak to Kelson as if he were a fool, which helped. "About what?" the duke asked seriously.

"Mairona. With the army. This whole— thing," Kelson exploded, waving his hand in frustration. "Does she still think she is on her own in Druimfada, with none to nay-say her? She is a queen now, for heaven's sake. Queens do not do this. Women do not do this!"

"I agree there are unpleasant complications, but most women were not raised as she was," Morgan reminded him. "Richenda has come to know a great deal about your wife in the past two months, and has written me about some very interesting things."

"Like what?" Kelson asked, exasperated.

"Did you know two of Meara's most famous and respected ancient royals were women?"

"Aye," Kelson returned in annoyance. "They ruled their country and led armies into battle. They are also long dead."

"Perhaps," Morgan continued, "but those are the stories Mairona, as all Mearans, was weaned on. Her father intended her to inherit Druimfada from very early on, and raised her more as a son than a daughter. The castle started as military post, with the town growing to meet the garrison's needs. Even though it has grown wealthy from its fine flocks of sheep, the place is crawling with soldiers, not gentlewomen. Is it no wonder that she would bristle to remain behind in Rhemuth, as a proper lady would? That she would act and think more like you than your mother, or your aunt, or Richenda?"

Kelson shook his head. "I knew all those things, but never saw it that way. I suppose next you will tell me you warned me, ere we were married. I knew she was different, and that is why I love her, but I never anticipated this. Alaric, am I being foolish in letting her go?"

"That depends on what you want from her. You can keep her in Rhemuth, forcing her into the role of a proper ladylike queen, which she would resent, or you can allow her to come with us to Druimfada, risking her life and encouraging whispers about her inappropriate behavior at court. Some will call you a weak husband, and if you are not careful it will affect how they see you as king. Some may even resurrect the cry of Deryni witch, pointing to her inappropriate behavior. The outcome is up to you, and you will do what you must." Morgan looked pointedly at the king, who found himself with a tangible decision he could handle.

"Thank you, Alaric. I think I need time to think." Kelson answered, tapping the Ring of Fire's ruby on his teeth.