

## ✠ Chapter 31 ✠

Kelson borrowed one of Morgan's nondescript voluminous black cloaks and pulled its hood far over his head so he could wander in relative anonymity. When he was on campaign, there was always one place he could find relative solitude—the horse pickets, which were usually deserted when the weather was bad. Finding a stiff brush, he started grooming Besieger, counting on the mindless task to help focus his mind. The white stallion laid his ears back in suspicion, then whickered a friendly greeting when he caught his master's scent and mental touch.

The head groom on duty spotted an unmarked stranger handling the king's horse, and blew out through pursed lips. Drawing his sword, he rushed threateningly at the stranger. "What are you doing? That is the king's horse, not to be touched!"

The cloaked man stepped back, and the groom readied his blade warily. As the stranger turned his head, the hood fell back enough for the groom to see his king's face. "Your Highness, forgive me, I did not know!" he stammered, nearly impaling himself on his own sword as he fell to his knees.

"There is nothing to forgive. You do your duty well," Kelson smiled reassuringly.

"I can groom him, Sire," the man offered, reaching for the brush. Kelson shook his head.

"Nay. My life may very well depend on this beast, so he must trust me. Sometimes that requires a mundane task, even for a king." He pulled the hood over his face again. "Return to your duties. I do not require assistance."

"Yes, your Highness," the man bowed, then made an embarrassed retreat. Kelson positioned himself between Besieger and the gray Thunder, his spare charger. Between the two he found as much solace as the crowded camp could possibly offer. A part of him maintained constant alert, but he was mostly lost in thought as he mechanically ran the brush over Besieger's dusty coat.

What was he supposed to do with Mairona? Morgan had put the choice very well. Make her behave as a proper wife and queen, and she would resent him. Give her a degree of the autonomy she wanted, and have a host of piqued nobles clamoring in his court. How do you treat a wife who was raised more like a soldier?

At least that endeared her to his troops. She had enthralled his guard almost to a man at Rhemuth, mostly by her ability to sing a court lay in one breath and a camp song in the next. Wouldn't that shock those indignant lords? Most likely, her willful insistence on going to Meara would only strengthen their devotion, and win the love of his army. What to do?

Besieger swung his great head back and butted Kelson, indicating he had an itch he couldn't reach. Smiling, Kelson reached up and scratched the stallion behind the ear, which was usually where the itch manifested itself. Whickering, the contented animal nudged him again in affection. "Ah, Besieger, how would you handle a wild mare, old friend?" Kelson murmured, patting his well-muscled neck. "Better than I, I would wager. My courtship seemed tame enough," he reminisced, thinking back to her arrival feast in the great hall, their first mind-sharing, and when he had asked her to marry him in the library. Then came the memory of their wedding, and their own ceremony that night. How a presence full of love had blessed their union.

That memory finally made his decision click into place. He believed that God intended them to have a happy life together, especially after their wedding night. The only way Mairona would be happy is to give her the freedom she desired, so long as it didn't endanger Gwynedd unduly. That is what he must do. But, by the Blessed Virgin, it was not going to be easy.

Two hours had passed by the time he had made his choice, and despite his resolution, he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to return to his tent. There was little point in stalking through the camp anymore, but he wasn't ready to face Mairona. She would either be petulant about him storming off, or try to smoothly convince him that he needn't worry. He didn't want to deal with either. Snorting, he lifted the flap.

The sight greeting him was not what he expected. His bath was full, eight feet round with steaming, scented water. Candles had been placed around it, and Mairona was seated on a campstool in her bedrobe, gazing longingly at the tub. She looked up in uneasy surprise when he entered. He didn't speak, so she smiled shyly.

"You smell like you have not had a bath since you left Rhemuth, and I am not much better," she said. Her finger traced a pattern in the water as her gaze dropped to the ripples she created. "I do not expect there will be many of these between here and Druimfada, so—" Her shoulders shrugged as her voice trailed off. After a moment, she dared to glance back up, and to her immense relief, he was grinning.

"The king stinks?" he asked, amused.

"Like royal horse droppings!" she laughed in release, coming forward to remove his cloak. The tunic followed closely.

"You were not complaining this morning." His eyes flashed amusement as he removed boots and breeches.

"The stench so overpowered me, my poor nose just refused to register anything for fear of fainting," she grinned, discarding her bedrobe.

"Is that so?" he raised his eyebrow. "My lady wife is no rose, either!" She squealed as he scooped her off the ground, turning to the tub with a wicked gleam in his eye.

"Oh, no!" she shook her head vehemently when she caught wind of his scheme. "Kelson Cinhil Rhys Anthony Haldane, do not even think of trying!"

"I do believe you need a good sudsing." He laughed mischievously, leaning over. She shrieked when he dropped her in the water, chemise and all. "Or was that dousing?"

"Oh! You—you—!" She struggled to get out of her chemise as Kelson relished in the first true belly laugh he had enjoyed since Eastmarch. That humor dissolved into sputters when he found her soaking chemise flung full-force at his head. Blinded and laboring to free himself, he was caught off-balance when Mairona grabbed his arm and yanked with an expertise that staggered him. Before he could react, he was tumbling head-first into the hot water and fighting to get back up to air. Finally, he righted himself and blinked water from his eyes as Mairona stretched like a contented cat, sighing as she leaned back against the tub's padded wall.

"I can handle myself in a spat," she said off-handedly, indulging in a large yawn. Kelson pounced on her, dunking her head.

"I can see that," he returned as she spat out water, her eyes betraying that she plotted her next move. Kelson reached for a cake of soap, disarming her as he gently washed away the grime of her journey. The hot water seemed to enhance his touch, and fire shot through her body as he rubbed her clean. "I love you," he whispered in her ear as he finished. She rewarded him with a ragged breath and a look of devotion. When he bent over to kiss her, though, she pushed him away and took up the soap.

"No, you will not miss your turn. What would my poor mind do if my eyes tell me I am in bed with my husband and my nose says you are a strange creature born of the middens?"

She went to work, scrubbing away many weeks' worth of sweat and grime. When she was satisfied, her touch grew more gentle, and he shuddered as her fingers trailed down his spine. "You sorely test my restraint, Mairona. You already halted my attempt to seduce you before."

She gave a laugh that bubbled from her chest. "You would seduce me, Kel? Who was waiting in her bedrobe beside a steaming bath?"

Grunting, he spun around and wrestled the soap from her hands, showing her exactly who was seducing whom.

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The next morning, Mairona woke before dawn. There had been no rain the previous day and night, so the army would be moving out today. It would all begin now.

Turning her head, she saw Kelson still fast asleep. A light touch of her mind made sure that didn't change as she extracted herself from his arms. Her bedrobe had been discarded beyond the curtained partition the previous evening, so she quietly slipped out into the tent's main space. Sometime during the night, Kelson's squires had removed the tub and placed her robe near the sleeping area. She picked it up and shrugged it on, then moved to where her chest had been placed.

Kneeling, she opened it up to rummage for comfortable riding clothes. A rust-colored divided skirt met her approval, so she pulled it out, then dropped it in her lap when she realized something was different. Relaxing, she centered herself to find the cause of the strange feeling. The answer was simple.

"Oh, Sweet Brigid, no," she breathed. "Not now."

Quickly, Mairona dressed and braided her hair, then escaped the tent before Kelson stirred. The encampment was still silent, with few people rising this early. Keeping to the shadows, Mairona searched for a reasonably private area and settled on a small space between some of the lesser tents. She sank to the ground and held her hands to her stomach.

"Hello, little one," she whispered. "I do welcome you, but your timing could not be worse." Sighing, she trained her eyes on the horizon's false dawn. "If your father learns of you, he will send me back to Rhemuth. If I hide you, he will be very angry with me."

Mairona fell silent, agonizing at the decision to be made, even when she knew the path she must take. Would it never be the easy one? "Forgive me, but I must conceal you for now and continue to Druimfada. After all, I have a duty to my people, and you can never be your father's heir, little princess. I have been fortunate, but you will find that ladies are the expendable ones. We must make sacrifices. You shall learn that lesson ere you are born."

Nodding her head, Mairona went into a light trance to prepare safeguarding this knowledge. It would be safe behind her massive shield wall, which Kelson had agreed could be her area of privacy. Quickly she tried to tuck this new knowledge behind that wall, but it would not give for her. In fact, it throbbed in displeasure. This was not right.

Frowning, she probed around the wall. She had formed it with old Halek's help, why would it not now yield to her wishes? Why could she not remember what was behind it? This was not good. Had someone tampered with her mind?

Kelson could help her break the wall and resolve it, but then he would discover his daughter, and Mairona would be back in Rhemuth before she could blink. This mystery would have to wait until Druimfada was taken care of, but there was still the matter of hiding the babe, and the camp

was starting to stir. Quickly, she threw all thoughts of the child to the deepest recesses of her mind, knowing she would have to avoid close rapport with Kelson until Druimfada was hers again. That would not be easy, and it would likely hurt him. Patting her stomach one last time, she rose and returned to Kelson's tent.