

## ✠ Chapter 32 ✠

It had been days since they crossed the Cloome Mountains which formed the Mearan border, all days of blessedly good weather. Kelson glanced to his right, observing his wife with pride. To his men, she seemed an unending well of strength who never ran dry. Only he shared the secret that she collapsed onto their camp bed more nights than not, exhausted and pale. She had suffered constant leg cramps the first week of their march, and he had to massage them nightly before she could lie comfortably. All things considered, she was still holding up better than he had ever expected.

He had been concerned initially how the men would handle her presence. That first morning, Kelson lectured her about her proper role as queen, and how to behave nobly and graciously in front of the lords and common men alike, and, most important of all, keep a low profile. She listened dutifully, then politely informed him that she had not won her people's devotion in Druimfada through gentile graciousness.

There had been whispered grumblings at first, mostly from the older men who had left their own wives at home. However; each night when they struck camp, Mairona left him to mingle with the common folk, tending the men who fell ill and learning their songs. Each day, another vestige of her royal position slipped away. It began with her mantle, then her circlet and veil. A few days ago, she had tired of cumbersome split skirts, and dressed in a pair of too-big leather breeches and an unmarked tunic she scrounged from his belongings. He had been scandalized, but his own men overruled his objections by cheering when she mounted up, looking like she was bound for a Mearan border patrol. This was the Mairona that Druimfada had bred, and she had won his army's hearts just as easily as she had his.

Kelson's head turned fully toward her when she stood in her stirrups, shielding her eyes against the sun. Her lips slowly spread in a smile as she found a familiar landmark down the valley. "Kelson!" she called. "Do you see the glint of that stream ahead?"

"Aye," he replied.

"When we cross it, Druimfada's lady can welcome its lord home."

"And he comes trailing a great war machine behind him. Will that endear me to your people?" he grinned.

"Evicting Rolf is a good start," she grumbled. Kelson couldn't help but snicker.

"If that is true, then hanging him will win me their unswerving loyalty."

"It will win you mine— Ho!" She reined in her mount, seeing a wagon crossing the stream in the distance. There was a ragged, broken line of people strewn behind it, stretching back through the valley. "Why?" she whispered, then dug her heels into her palfrey's ribs.

"Mairona!" he screamed, but she didn't respond. "You will get yourself killed," he muttered as he motioned for his guard and a full company of knights to ride ahead with him. Armored as they all were, they couldn't overtake Mairona on her half-blooded R'Kassan steed. Thank God no Mearans came out of hiding to ambush her.

When Kelson approached the stream, Mairona was speaking quickly with one of the peasants in the Mearan tongue. The man observed him quickly, writing him off as a representative of the Haldane crown obviously under Mairona's command. Kelson found himself more amused than offended at the assumption that everyone must obey Druimfada's lady.

Suddenly Mairona's face mouth narrowed and her eyes burned. "Kelson," she called as he reined in beside her. The Mearan peasant recognized the name, and his eyes went wide in fear.

"What is it?" he asked.

"That bastard is burning Druimfada," she spat out.

"The town, the castle, or both?" Kelson was incredulous.

"The town."

"That means he knows he has lost," he tried to reassure her.

"Aye, and so has Pdraig here, and all the people behind him." Mairona closed her eyes, squeezing out sudden tears which left muddy tracks through travel dust. "What are they to do? I swore to protect them, and I failed." Her voice cracked on the last word when she saw the column of smoke rising over the ridge. Kelson squeezed her shoulder in reassurance, then maneuvered his horse to get a clear look at the peasant.

"Pdraig, I am your king. I have come to reclaim your town for you and your fellows. I will help you rebuild your homes. Will you fight with me?" The man stared blankly, cowering back. "Mairí, will you translate?" Kelson asked.

"Aye, he does not speak your tongue." The language seemed like chatter to Kelson, similar to the border tongue in Transha, yet crisper. Finally, Pdraig tugged his hair and bowed awkwardly.

"*Go raith maith agat, ard rí,*" the man mumbled.

"*Báil ó Dhía oraibh,*" she called to him as he retreated to the thin ribbon of refugees. "Kelson, he will tell your offer to all men fleeing Druimfada. He says fighting a butcher who slays his own people in their homes can only bring honor."

"How far away is the town?"

"Shy of eight leagues," she returned.

"Then we must speed our pace."

Mairona barely heard his commands to his ducal generals. She just stared at the black snake of smoke with stunned shock. Kelson knew she needed his comfort, and grieved that he had to play soldier-king instead of husband. There was no helping it; that was the price of his crown, and her price for leaving the safety of Rhemuth.

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In the moments he allowed himself to be distracted from planning an assault, Kelson worried about Mairona. She had retreated behind heavy shields, distancing herself in pain and outrage. At one point she turned pale, slumping as her hand went to her stomach.

"What ails you?" he asked. She jerked her hand back to the reins, straightening her seat.

"Rolf ails me," she growled, looking straight ahead.

Mairona was furious with herself for coming close to revealing her secret, but the babe and the shock made her feel ill. Now Kelson was concerned, and would be watching her carefully. She must not show weakness. Must not. Will not. Pressure was building behind that mysterious wall in her mind, a flood surging against a breaking dam, and she couldn't determine why. *I will not break.*

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Tears fell openly down Mairona's cheeks when they came to the town, its gates burned and unguarded. Through them, she could see smoking, charred chaos. "I will make it right," Kelson swore to her, but she remained cold and distant.

Scouts were sent into the town to make sure it wasn't a trap. They returned, testifying that Rolf's men had indeed retreated into the keep.

"Why?" Mairona asked.

"Because the town walls are no longer defensible," one replied patiently.

"That is clear, I am not a fool!" she snapped back. "Why did he burn the town? It is an act of suicide!"

"I do not know for certes," he answered apologetically. "From what little I could make out, it seems this was all done by Torenti mercenaries."

Mairona spat on the ground. "I want Rolf's head on a pike!" she hissed viciously.

The scout looked uncertainly at Kelson, who dismissed him as he examined his wife just as uncertainly. Stories confided in the winter safety of Rhemuth had not prepared him for the reality of his wife retreating into the more familiar role of Mearan chieftain, kin to those who had risen against Gwynedd in the past.

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An hour later, well surrounded by companies of men, Kelson and Mairona rode through the town walls, though what was arrayed before them no longer resembled a town. It was like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, twisted piles of charred timber collapsing on itself, the smell of burnt wood, plaster, and flesh assaulting the senses, streets blocked with black wreckage. Everything her father and his father and his father before him had worked to build, everything she had nurtured since it was left in her care, gone like the snuffing of a candle. How many had died? How many could possibly remain? *If I had been here I could have stopped this!*

As it became apparent that no one was left to ambush them, Mairona pushed her way to the head of the army as she saw the miracle of people crouched amid the rubble that had been their lives, quaking in terror of these new soldiers. Tears streamed down Mairona's cheeks as she dismounted and talked softly to a family, then moved on to a group of brothers. As the people recognized her, they slowly came out from their hiding places, reaching for their lady. Mairona took their hands and shared in their pain.

For her, the biggest tragedy lay further on. An infant girl wailed over the bodies of her parents, both dead of appalling wounds inflicted by the mercenaries' cruel whims. The child's hair was black, like Kelson's daughter might have. Her daughter, who would be just as helpless to dynastic struggles, alliances, and warfare. Mairona scooped up the babe and cradled her close, sobbing uncontrollably. Kelson dismounted and put his arm around her, but she gave no indication of his presence.

"Sire!" a voice yelled from the direction of the keep. Haldane Lancers instantly closed on the king and queen as a horse galloped up the street, its rider's red hair streaming behind.

"Fergal!" Mairona choked, pushing her way through the guards, still clutching the child to her breast.

"I could not stop them," Fergal cried. "This was Rolf's doing. Damn Torenthi mercenaries!" He spat his disdain on the ground.

Something inside Mairona snapped, and her world became clearer as the massive shield wall splintered. "Oh, Fergal!" she sobbed, running to him. He embraced her, careful not to harm the infant. Kelson could only look on helplessly, envious that she had so easily found comfort he couldn't give in another man's arms.