

✠ Chapter 33 ✠

As much as he knew Mairona needed comfort, Kelson had to meet with his military generals to plan the taking of Druimfada. That left her in Fergal's care, and something about that and her recent distance niggled the back of his brain. Still, he could do little without looking like a jealous fool. She had a lifetime to fall in love with Fergal, and never had, so there was little reason she should now. Yet, the vision of her rejecting his compassion and running so easily to Fergal still played repeatedly in his mind.

While Kelson and his commanders raised their tents outside the city walls, Mairona began to see about the care of her people. She kept the infant always on her hip, and in a quiet moment fed her. One of the peasant women, who owned one of the surviving cows, had generously given a bowl of rare milk she so badly needed herself. The child was old enough to drink it with help, and Mairona spoke quietly to her.

"You are Morrigan, are you not?" The infant looked up at the sound of her name. "It is fitting for you to be named after the ancient goddess of war."

It was a long day, overseeing the construction of temporary shelters out of the remaining timber strong enough to be reused, clearing rubble away from somewhat-habitable buildings, and giving her people the will to rebuild their lives. Most of the survivors who remained in the town would sleep under a roof that night, even if that roof had no walls to keep out the wind. By late afternoon, the child's aunt had been found, and the babe returned to her closest kin. Mairona cried in loss as she turned away with empty arms.

At the end of the day, sooty, sweaty, and exhausted, Mairona was escorted by Fergal, Seánin, and the rest of her personal guard as she walked the outer city walls in silence, forbidding either of them from interrupting her meditations as she reclaimed memories released when the shield wall disintegrated, sorting the true and the false. Her entire premise for visiting Rhemuth had been a lie; the truth solidly blocked months ago, safe from Deryni prying, and replaced with false memories. It had all been done with such skill that even she had not suspected in the intervening time, even though it had all been done according to her will. A new version of the events leading to the escape from Druimfada unfolded themselves in her mind.

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Rolf had been gloating, for certes, that day in her hall last February. He was much too confident in their success by her measure. But then, it was ever easy for her to find fault with the greedy earl who had the good fortune to be a powerful neighbor, and so could not be dismissed outright. A missive lay nearly forgotten in her hand, and she started tapping it against her opposing arm in annoyance. "This is very risky, what we do here, Rolf." She called him by his Christian name, knowing it goaded him and there was little he could do about it. By right of blood she was his queen, Queen of Meara. "We do not know the extent of the Haldane's abilities. He may see through our ruse immediately."

"Or he may refuse to come into our trap at all, and all will be lost. Will your courage hold in the face of the devil?" he challenged.

She rankled at the term devil. While the Haldanes had never been friends to her people, the current head of that family, the young King of Gwynedd, had won the distinction of being Satan's spawn mostly by being Deryni. Mairona was Deryni, too. So was Rolf of Tirkeeve, for that matter. "Do

not make the mistake of considering me a child. My courage is as strong as any man's!" she shot back, nearly crumpling the parchment in her hand. "Better ask if you can stomach treason, for that is what we do here." Before he could respond, she held up her hand to silence him. "My lord, we quarrel for nothing and not to Meara's benefit. Let us do our work and be done with it."

"Very well," he replied with an insincere smile as she moved to him and held out the parchment with jeweled fingers.

"See that Fergal gets this in a few days time, when he cannot follow me."

"Aye, my lady." He took the missive and placed it on the table in front of them. "Are you ready?"

"I am," she answered, willing herself to relax. Rolf placed the tips of his fingers on her forehead and forged a link between the two. Her true memories and motivations were masked deep behind that impenetrable shield wall he helped her construct, then replaced with false ones of violent disagreement that would lure the Haldane king to Druimfada.

When he had finished, she had been helpless before his will until he released her, which he wouldn't do just yet. She now remembered staring blankly at the wall before her as Rolf put one hand on her shoulder and took up the missive in the other. He led her around the table to the chamber's door. As they passed the fireplace, he tossed the missive intended for Fergal into the tallest flames, then coaxed his queen out the door and up the spiral stair to her bedchamber.

As Mairona reflected on this, anger grew as she saw how poor Fergal must have suffered in ignorance, hurt and confused over why she would have left him without a word. That anger was nothing compared to the rage about to course through her veins.

Once they had gained her room at the top of the tower, Rolf had no qualms about stripping her of her clothing. It was with great reluctance that he whispered in her ear, "Time to sleep, my sweet." She crawled into her great bed and slipped between the coverlets with a mindless obedience. He took one last, longing look at her bathed in colorless moonlight. Grudgingly, he turned and let himself out of the chamber.

That beast! He had taken advantage of her helplessness, stripped her *nude!* She would rather lie in a den of snakes than let Rolf see her unclothed.

The sound of the door slamming brought Mairona back to her senses. She sat straight up in bed, clutching the linens to her heaving breast. Fear shone on her face, and she extended her senses around the chamber to make sure she was now truly alone, that Rolf and his repulsive threat of forced marriage were gone. Yes, thank God. He couldn't— he just wouldn't dare! She must call Saraid— No, not until I know what to do. She had to stop him—how?

How could she ensure her safety? Rolf must leave Druimfada after tonight, but no. She had tried that before, only to prove that her men were desperately outnumbered. If Rolf couldn't be ejected, then she must go. Tears stung at her eyes at the painful thought of fleeing her beloved home, then started to flow when she was shamed to admit she wasn't strong enough to

protect herself or her people. She must leave, though, or Rolf would win. Where to go?

The king! Of course! She must plead to the King of Gwynedd, and pray to God he didn't clap her in chains for being named the pretender Queen of Meara. That was none of her doing, after all, and her family had been loyal to the Haldanes for three generations now. Yes, she would go to the king's court at Rhemuth.

Mairona dried her tears on the linens, then jumped off the bed and approached the entry to an adjoining chamber. She remembered at the last minute to open the door softly and not make overmuch noise. "Saraid!" she called to wake her sleeping maid. "Saraid, get up. We must leave to Rhemuth ere dawn breaks."

Oh, God—she had really managed to make an enormous mess of things. Why did she have to marry the Haldane? How did she let that happen? "I wish to be alone," she clipped curtly to her escort. "Withdraw a distance."

She didn't look to make sure they obeyed—she didn't need to. Her arms folded on the wall's new crenellations, constructed by her command and just finished last year. Most of them had been torn down in the mercenaries' sacking, but this length still stood firm. Her chin rested on her arms as she looked down to the valley below and cried. At least no one would question that.

What demon had possessed Rolf to burn the town? How could he betray her like this? What did he think he would gain? One thing was clear in her sight; Rolf had destroyed everything, any chance of success. Somehow, that eased her heart instead of angering her. It was astounding how five months had changed everything, and how she could ruin all in one day.

What in damnation could she do now? Why in all hell did she have care for the Haldane? Why did he have to be so damned—*Gentle. Kind. Loving*. Why couldn't he just be the demon king as the mountain Mearans believed? No use in lamenting now, there would be time later. Now was a time for action. What were her current choices?

She could gain entrance to her castle, and lead its defense against Gwynedd. That would only be stalling for time, during which men would needlessly lose their lives, and Druimfada Town would wither and die.

She could confess to Kelson, throw herself on his mercy, and likely end up executed. Being an unwilling Pretender Queen was one thing; plotting the death of the King of Gwynedd was something else entirely. In the aftermath, he would still lay siege to Druimfada Castle, men would needlessly die— She had already visited that scenario.

She could follow through with her plan, despite Rolf's going mad. Lead Kelson to his death, return to her castle, and—No. She couldn't possibly—Tears surged anew as her heart bled at the thought of her husband falling to the ground, his face twisted in tortuous shock as his lifeblood spilled helplessly, wondering why his time was cut so short—No. She would not let her emotion affect her thoughts. Prince Nigel was Kelson's heir presumptive, and Nigel was a renowned military genius who would crush Meara, and show little mercy in his quest for revenge.

What option was left? She could hide all, and if she were fortunate, she could bring peace between Druimfada and Kelson before he discovered her. At least then her people would have a chance to rebuild the chaos strewn before her, and they would live. Aye, that was the only real option, even though she would still die a traitor. That was what she had to do.

Sniffing one last time, she dried her eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm and center herself. With each intake she stood taller, with each exhalation her eyes and mouth set in greater

determination. Finally, she turned to the guard who had retreated to give her some space and a semblance of privacy.

"I will return to the king's tent now," she told them.

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In the tent, Kelson's advisors and generals were still gathered around a brazier, exploring their options. Mairona entered with Fergal, and noticed with surprise that Kelson, Morgan, Ewan and Dhugal were covered in ash like her. "Good evening, my lords," she greeted, collapsing on a cushion near her husband.

The sight of his wife with Fergal didn't gladden Kelson, but he buried his feelings deeply and found a smile for them as Dolfin poured wine for the new arrivals. "Mairona, you could not be more timely. You as well, Fergal. Come, sit with us. You have information on Rolf and this castle that we need. To begin with, how many men does he have?"

Morgan and Ewan moved apart to make room for Fergal, who gratefully took a seat as Mairona took her wine. Fergal looked at her questioningly, and only answered when she nodded. "Many Mearans deserted at this outrage, and slew most of the Torenthi on their way out. The chieftains have turned on Rolf, who is now imprisoned and kept drugged from my lady's supply of merasha."

Kelson smiled grimly. "Never rouse the ire of a Mearan. How many remain in the castle?"

"Around seventy-five," Fergal estimated, nodding thanks to Dolfin as he offered refreshment.

"And how many does it take to defend your castle?" Kelson turned to Mairona.

"Only forty, because it is unapproachable by any force outside the town walls. They have enough to do alternate watches, and with the Torenthi gone they'll have more food per man," she concluded.

"So, either we find a way to get behind the walls or we have a very long siege."

"There is a way," Mairona whispered, eyes fixed on the tent flap opposite her. What the devil was she doing? No! This was the plan to assassinate the Haldane, but she couldn't stop herself. Her movements, her speech were no longer under her direction, usurped by a command set long ago by Tirkeeve to ensure she wouldn't fail him. "My ancestors had a tunnel carved through the rock, as an escape if the keep were ever taken. Of course, it is also a way in."

"How many men can walk abreast?" Morgan asked.

"Only two, if they are to have room to handle a sword," she answered, her eyes slightly glazed.

"Mairona?" Kelson touched her shoulder, and she shook her head, but it didn't clear the fogginess. "Mairí, I know you are tired, but I need to know where to find this tunnel and a layout of the castle."

"Hmmm? Oh, yes. Forgive me, my lords. May I use your dagger?" Wordlessly, Kelson handed it to her as she put down her wine. She should use that knife on him directly—No, she would not! This must stop, she must prevent this, it only led to ruin! There was no way for her to halt it, not without help, and she would not receive that from anyone in this tent. Her hand unwillingly scraped a rough map in the dirt floor that showed the tunnel's hidden entrance, and where it emptied in the great hall and the lord's chambers. When she was through explaining the

route, distances, and possible dangers, she handed the blade back to Kelson, hilt first. All the dukes gathered round nodded in appreciation of her insight into the concerns of military assault.

"We can finish without you," Kelson said gently. "Go and sleep now."

"I do not think I can," she replied sadly, but he smiled when she yawned heavily.

"Go, Mairí," he repeated. She rose and disappeared through a curtained partition to the pallet she shared with him.

She was tired, but there was too much anticipation and worry to sleep. Mairona longed for small Morrigan, who had provided a focus and a means of distraction from the horror unfolding around her. The final piece was laid, but how would it play out? She had seen no peace since the shield wall broke, and she could find no way to stop what was beyond her control. Perhaps sometime in the night, with Kelson at her side, she would find the strength to overcome.

Refusing to think about her mission further, Mairona thought of the babe she bore, and pressed her hands to her stomach, wondering if the child would live. Her entire being fervently hoped so, that some small trace of her would carry on in her child, and then realized she would never know, would never see her daughter grow, would never sing her to sleep. Tears welled, but she dashed them away. She had been born to serve the Dugain dynasty, not to become wife and mother, and had learned long ago to make comfort and pleasure with what was at hand. If she could not sing to her daughter after the child was born, she would do so now. Mairona began humming a tune her mother had sang to still her when she was a child, an ancient melody nearly as old as the fierce people living in her mountains. She was still singing softly, rocking slowly back and forth when Kelson finally came to bed.

"Mairona?" he asked, letting the tapestry wall fall back into place behind him.

"Hmmm? Oh. I was only missing little Morrigan. Caring for the babe took my mind off Druimfada," she offered to him. It was not total truth, but it was not a lie either, and he would not be the wiser.

"Tis more than that, I would wager," Kelson replied as he sat next to her.

Mairona looked at him, startled and suddenly frightened of how well he really did know her, and how easily he could read her closed face. How to recover? "With her black hair, and her eyes bearing a hint of green—"

"She could be our own," he finished for her.

"Aye, she could. Did you know Morrigan was the name for the ancient Mearan goddess of war? That babe is a child of this destruction," Mairona said simply, then looked up at Kelson, really taking in his appearance for the first time. "You are as dirty as I am."

He shrugged. "I toured the town with Morgan and Dhugal briefly, and lent help where I could. You cannot think there is clean work to be done there." Kelson fell silent, not wanting to share how gruesome the sights were, or how many other men, women, and children they had found crushed or burned to death underneath the remnants of their homes.

"I love you," Mairona whispered fiercely, touching his face. Her eyes suddenly went wide as she jerked back.

"You act as if that surprises you," he said wearily. "What is happening? Why are you closed to me?"

Mairona dropped her hands in her lap and looked down at them. *Help me!!!* her mind screamed. *Stop this before I kill you!!!* her heart begged, bleeding the remnants of love and happy dreams, but she was not allowed to voice her plea. "You are an outsider here, Kelson. For years, the Haldane kings have destroyed much of my Meara, and even you have done your share. I am sorry. This is one thing you cannot help me with."

"Mairí, I did nothing in the previous war without provocation, and I did not destroy your town," he told her.

"I know that," she said. "I did not expect this."

"I would do anything for you, Mairí."

"Anything that does not harm Gwynedd. I know. Good night, Kelson."

"Good night, love."

Kelson watched desolately as she turned her back toward him, then lay down beside her in his armor. His hand rested on her arm, and although she stiffened, he would not remove it. He had been sleeping in his armor since they crossed the Mearan border, and he was exhausted from the day's physical exertions, so despite his emotional turmoil he fell asleep immediately. Mairona wasn't so lucky, and once she heard his breath deepen in slumber, she wept that he could not hear her appeals, and that he would die in the morn. She spent most of the night vainly fighting the compulsion that would ultimately kill her husband, whom she had grown to love so very much.

She did find sleep in the early hours of pre-dawn, and was so tired with her fruitless effort that Kelson didn't disturb her when he rose at first light to command the assault on Druimfada keep. Mairona eventually woke from a fitful dream, one in which Kelson pointed a finger at her, face full of pain and hatred, asking "Why? Why?" Shaken, she sat up on the pallet and rubbed her temples.

"Mairona, do you wake?" a voice called from behind the curtain.

"Fergal!" Mairona exclaimed, rising from the bed she had shared one last time with her husband. "Give me one moment." She quickly slipped on her dressing gown entered the main space.

"Rolf told me why you went to Rhemuth, although marriage to the king was not a part of the plan," he told her.

"I was blocked. I did not know," she replied simply.

"Aye, and it will not matter for long," he said.

"I never thought he would be a good man," she said wistfully. "He was the demon Haldane king, a monster. I am Deryni myself, I should have known better than to give credence to those stories." She breathed deeply. "Why did Rolf burn Druimfada? That was also not part of the plan."

"He was angered that you married the Haldane instead of him. It was an act of revenge," Fergal explained. Her eyes turned hard, flashing light like clear faceted gems.

"I chose more wisely than he wished for me. I will kill him for this."

Fergal gently placed his hand on her arm. "I led my fellow chieftains against him for you. When the King of Gwynedd is dead, during the confusion in Rhemuth you will be able to lead Meara to independence. Then, I hope you will accept me as a suitor and eventually as husband."

When the King of Gwynedd is dead... Oh, Kelson! Mairona's hand went to her stomach, to the child that grew within. She thought of Kelson's kindness, his love for his people, and how he loved her. How she did love him. And Rolf's men, waiting in their hiding places around the tunnel entrance where she had shown them those many months ago. Waiting to assassinate the man who was now her husband, and with it kill Druimfada. No, I cannot stop what was happening. It was planned months ago, I wanted it, and it is pointless to prevent it, I do not have the strength—

Wrong. She did have the strength, given to her by a child conceived in love she had never dared dream she would find. *SILENCE!!!!* she screamed to the voice in her mind. *You WILL NOT rule me, for I am the Queen of Gwynedd and Meara, ruling Baroness of Druimfada and Chieftain of the Dugains! You will not stop me!* The alien opposing voice that preached regicide cowered back, gibbering in a corner of her mind, but it no longer ruled her body.

"This cannot happen!" she cried, shoving past Fergal as she ran out of the tent in her dressing gown.