

✠ Chapter 34 ✠

Everything fell into place all too easily as Mairona ran out the tent for her husband's life. She had been a fool to ever trust Rolf, or plan with him how to lure Kelson to his death. Now he had burned Druimfada to spite her for marrying the Haldane demon, denying Rolf a chance at kingship of Meara. It was now clear who the real demon was, and she must warn Kelson before it was too late, to right her wrong. It did not matter if she died; he must live.

She was thwarted as soon as she left the tent, for Dolfin was returning from an errand and found his sense of propriety offended. "My lady!" he called, blocking her way. "My lady, you must not walk around dressed like this," he admonished her, gesturing to her robe.

"Of course, there is a faster way," she mentally berated herself for not thinking clearly in her panic. "Dolfin, you were in the king's tent last night when I showed where the tunnel entrance is. Can you find it?"

"Aye, madam," he replied, as if such a question were unnecessary.

"The king is in grave danger! If he gains the tunnel entrance, Rolf's men are waiting to kill him. I will try to warn him through Deryni means. You must ride to tell him yourself, in case I fail."

"Aye, madam!" Dolfin did not need to be dismissed. He was already sprinting to the picket lines to commandeer the fastest scout horse available. Mairona whirled and reentered the tent.

"What are you doing? You will destroy everything!" Fergal protested. "Are you not thinking of what will happen when the king discovers you—" He was silenced as Mairona reached out and touched his neck, bidding him sleep soundly for the next few hours. Only when she was sure he would not rouse did she sit cross-legged and center as she had been taught years ago.

Kelson still wore his Camber medal, and she focused on that, praying the saint would aid her in delivering her message. *Kelson*, she called, trying to picture the war band approaching the tunnel. *Kelson, please hear me. You must hear me!*

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In the forest surrounding Druimfada, Kelson and his men approached the tunnel that promised surprise entrance to the castle. He had slept too soundly the night before, and stiff neck muscles were giving him a headache. There hadn't been time to have Dhugal or Morgan take care of it earlier, so now he suffered in silence.

"My liege!" Dhugal called, pointing. "There is the *cloch clairseach* the queen spoke of, the harp-shaped rock."

"Then the tunnel should be—" Kelson's voice trailed off as his eyes scanned the woodland before him. "There!" he concluded, finding the semicircular ring of bushes that had been carefully planted to conceal the entrance. "Morgan, deploy the men—Ooh!" he exclaimed, wincing.

"Sire?" Morgan asked, bringing his mount closer in alarm. Kelson shook his head, rubbing his temples.

"Tis nothing. I woke with a demon of a headache this morn." He tried to laugh it off.

"No, I felt something, too," Dhugal protested, lifting his hand to the Camber medal he wore, an identical copy of Kelson's. "But not painful, nor malicious."

Another wave of pain stabbed through Kelson's forehead. "There it is again," he muttered. Morgan noticed it that time as well, centered around his own medal.

"It feels Deryni. Dhugal, see to the king. Ewan, deploy the men. I will try to determine the source of this thing," Morgan said, dropping his mount's reins with a brief mental command to stay put. He watched Dhugal reach a hand over to Kelson before he closed his eyes. "'Tis the queen," Morgan murmured.

Dhugal made quick work of Kelson's head and neck, then they both turned to Morgan, eager to see what was so important. Suddenly Morgan's eyes bolted open. "Archers!" he exclaimed. "This is a trap!"

Morgan's arm struck like a thunderbolt as he grabbed a fistful of Kelson's surcoat, then yanked as he dove off his horse. Kelson's personal bodyguards closed ranks between their king and the tunnel, while foot soldiers ran forward to create a shield wall. Dhugal leapt off his horse, feeling an arrow sing by his ear.

Kelson's left shoulder went numb as he hit the ground. Funny, he had fallen on his right side. Glancing down, he noticed with shock a clothyard shaft buried in his brigandine. If Morgan had not acted so quickly, that arrow would have been through his heart. Blood was seeping through, warm and sticky on his skin.

"Kelson!" Dhugal yelled, diving to his blood brother's side. He immediately began examining the wound while Morgan appraised the surrounding situation. Arrows continued to fly overhead, forcing them to stay low to the ground.

"How bad is it?" Morgan asked.

"No serious damage done, though he will go into shock if we do not tend to it," Dhugal concluded, breaking off the shaft within inches of the wound. Kelson groaned, cursing his shoulder for choosing that moment to stop being numb.

"We have to move him. It is too dangerous to Heal him here. I would give anything if we had not left our archers in the camp—" The duke only allowed a brief moment of wishing. "Ewan can keep those Mearans' attention. You will mount up with Kelson in your saddle. I will ride at your side, using Deryni skill to deflect the arrows."

"Right," Dhugal agreed. Morgan crawled toward Ewan as Dhugal assisted Kelson, trying to block his pain.

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Back in the camp, Mairona dressed hurriedly as she reflected on how quickly Morgan had broken off contact. The message had been given before the trap was sprung, but she still felt that something was horribly wrong.

Fergal was removed from the king's tent on her orders, to be watched closely. Once he was gone, she waited just outside the tent, pacing, refusing to think. Either possibility was too dreadful to consider. If the plan succeeded, she had just led her beloved husband to his death. If it failed, she was a traitor and her life forfeit. She could run away and save herself, but that was a coward's action, and would only lead to prolonged war with many deaths on both sides. Why had no word come? She had been waiting for an eternity! *Saints Brigid and Camber, please protect him. It does not matter what happens to me, please keep him safe. Why is there no word?*

Finally she could hear horses' hooves thundering at a full gallop. Because of the maze-like configuration of tents, she would not see them until they were nearly upon the king's tent, and a little piece of her seemed to die which each *clomp* of an unseen charger's hoof on the turf. When

they did appear, the sight horrified her. "Kelson!" she screamed as she ran toward Dhugal's steed, which was shuddering to a halt. Kelson's face was gray as he slid off the horse, swaying heavily when he hit the ground. "Oh, sweet Brigid, Kelson!" she exclaimed as she reached under his arm to support him. He tried to smile at her.

"No worrying, love. Dhugal says I will live."

"Thank God, I feared the worst!"

Dhugal and Morgan appeared from nowhere when Kelson stumbled again. "Sleepy," he yawned. Mairona had seen enough border patrol injuries to recognize the symptoms of shock.

"If you dare fall asleep, I will have you thrashed!" she threatened.

"You would thrash your king?" he returned as he was half-dragged, half-carried into his tent.

"Aye, and I am certain I could get Dhugal or Alaric to comply," she returned sternly as he was laid on a pallet. She cradled his head in her lap, chattering to keep his attention while Dhugal and Morgan washed their hands and went to work on the wound.

"Kelson," Morgan called, "we cannot remove your armor without sawing through the shaft from underneath. Dhugal has made certain you will feel little pain."

"Go ahead," Kelson winced. Thanks to Dhugal's talents, he soon felt detached from what was happening to his body.

Morgan caught Mairona's eye briefly. *Keep talking*, he sent her.

"Kelson, when this is over I have a surprise gift for you," she smiled.

"What could that be?" he asked dreamily.

"I will not tell you until you have been Healed," she insisted.

"Why not?" Kelson protested.

"Because this way you will not go to sleep on me," she told him bluntly.

"Fair enough," he grinned, then continued to try to wheedle it out of her. Meanwhile, Dhugal tried to pry Kelson's brigandine coat open enough for Morgan to saw through the arrow's remains with a dagger. Soon the brigandine was removed, and Morgan's fingers firmly probed the wound as his mind extended down the shaft remains.

"The barbs are wide. This is going to be nasty," he muttered. Kelson turned even grayer and Mairona stopped in mid-sentence, her mouth opening as her eyes went wide in fear. "The peril is minimal, since it missed the lung and does not endanger any large veins in the direction it is placed," Morgan reassured them. "It will only be nasty." Color returned to Mairona's face, and Kelson became less gray. "Mairona, Dhugal has released the pain blocks so he can better assist me. See what you can do to make him more comfortable."

Sweet Brigid, how could she enter rapport with Kelson without giving herself away? "No," she murmured, "I cannot!"

"We do not have time for this nonsense!" Dhugal exclaimed through his teeth. "Do it now!"

She looked at both dukes, who understandably had no patience with her protest. Her eyes dropped to Kelson, whose face was tense with agony as his eyes betrayed hurt at her reluctance.

How could she not do this? How could she do it without giving all way? She must keep herself well-shielded, not think of anything. A few deep breaths set the walls in place, and then she nodded.

"Alright," she conceded, splaying her fingers through Kelson's hair as her consciousness settled on his and eliminated his awareness of the throbbing that radiated in spindled waves from his collarbone. As his features relaxed, the dukes went to work together. Kelson was blissfully unaware of their actions, enjoying the first touch of Mairona's mind on his in several days with a bittersweetness stemming from her near total closure to him.

Mairí, why can you not share yourself with me?

She could block his physical pain, but his emotional torment lay bare, and tears wet the ends of her lashes. Sweet Jesu, was there no other way? *You will know soon enough, my love. Please, give me these few moments.*

I know you grieve for Druimfada, and I wish to share your pain.

No. Mairona shook her head. *You do not understand.*

Then give me understanding. There was a vague tugging sensation as the arrow was ripped free, then pressure, as Morgan's fingers slipped in the wound and a warmth as he called on his power to Heal.

It will come all too soon, she answered, a feather-light reply. *Please do not hurry it.*

Partial perception eased through his thoughts. If it was not simple grief, then— *You are protecting someone.*

Aye. The tears spilled over before she could will them to stop. *I have never lied to you, and I never will. You will know all soon after you are Healed, so please do not press me now.*

Morgan's fingers were withdrawing from the raw hole, mending torn tissue as they passed. In a few moments his fingertips drew clear, leaving behind a tender pink scar and a smear of leftover blood. "We are finished," he announced tiredly, leaning back on his heels. Released from duty, Mairona nearly leaped away, breaking their rapport with a jarring snap. Trying to cover her strong desire to flee, Mairona fumbled over a wineskin, but never actually poured anything to drink. As Kelson sat up, he moved his shoulder around experimentally, working out a lingering stiffness. It felt like he had strained it, perhaps, but it certainly did not appear to have suffered the ravages of a longbow's near-deadly shot.

"Thank you," he told Dhugal and Morgan. "And my most grateful thanks to you, Mairí. If you had not sent word I would likely be dead." He took her hand, rubbing it affectionately.

"I feared that I would be too late," she told him, tears breaking free again to roll down her cheeks. She choked on a sob as the guilt welled from her stomach and caught in her throat.

"Hush," Kelson whispered, pulling her down to sit next to him. "Another day or two, I will be no worse for the wear." He held her until she pulled the tears under control, then wiped off her face and took her hand again. "How did you know?"

Mairona turned her face away, unable to meet his eyes.

"Mairí, who are you protecting? Is it Fergal?"

"No," she whispered. "Not Fergal."

"Tell me," Kelson insisted gently. Mairona squeezed his hand, and he wondered what could possibly make her look more desolate than she had when she was assaulted in All Saint's Cathedral square.

"I will," she whispered, "but please, first, just hold me and let me thank God and the saints that you are safe."

Kelson did so, as much out of mounting trepidation as to ease her mind. As one arm circled around her shoulders and the other enclosed her waist, he wondered at how changed she was, how utterly lost and despondent. It was so counter to her nature that he knew something was terribly wrong, and her actions made it appear that she believed the knowledge she carried would greatly upset or anger him. She buried her head in his chest and sobbed, clutching him as if he would be stolen away by some unseen force that was also tearing her apart. Had he not already proven he was made of steadier stuff than she believed? He pressed his lips against her hair as he spoke her name. "Mairí?"

Shuddering, she brought herself under control, falling still in the way only trained Deryni do as they center and focus. She pulled away, putting space between them, but she could not let go his hand. "I helped Rolf plan the trap before I left for Rhemuth."

"How could you help?" Kelson asked, still not seeing the impossible. "By telling him the tunnel existed?"

"No." Trembling, she closed her eyes and breathed deeply before continuing. "My true memories were blocked until yesterday. I knew what he planned, and I told him where to best place his men."

Kelson threw her hand away violently, his eyes turning fierce and icy. Morgan quickly placed himself between Kelson and Mairona as Dhugal grabbed her arms, twisting them painfully behind her.

"Can you give any reason why you should not be cut down as a traitor?" the border duke spat with hatred.

"One," she stated, attempting to smile as she looked at her husband. It died in his lifeless gaze. "The gift I mentioned before. My king, I carry your daughter."

Dhugal let out a string of expletives in his native border tongue as Kelson stared. If Mairona's betrayal had been a fist in his gut, this revelation was the sword that pierced his heart.

"When?" he asked flatly.

"Since the day I came to meet you in camp," she replied. So, she had hidden that from him as well. Kelson rose, looking paler than before.

"Alaric," he called. "The trunk near my camp bed has a small wooden case in the bottom left corner. Take the merasha it contains and mix up a strong draught."

Merasha—the drug that plunged Deryni senses into chaos, effectively incapacitating their owner psychically and physically. The duke paused. "What of the child?" he asked.

If it were possible, Kelson's eyes grew steelier as he spoke in a voice that was dangerously soft. "The child is mine. You will make the draught, and Mairona will drink."

"No! Please, you cannot!" Mairona begged, falling to her knees. Dhugal struggled to keep hold of her arms, and she screamed as one was wrenched out of joint.

"You will be silent!" Kelson hissed, crossing the distance between them with an ominous determination. He did not raise his hand, but there was a drive in the urgency of his anger that made her shrink in fear, yet she would not back down.

"Do what you must, I will not resist you. Truth-Read me, see that I do not lie. The wall is gone, it will do no damage, and I swear I will let you pass through all barriers. I know my life is now forfeit, but think of your daughter!"

"We have Truth-Read you before, even Read you in rapport, and still you deceived. You will drink so you may do so no longer."

Mairona's lips quivered at Kelson's reversion to the royal "we." He stared her down as Morgan retrieved the merasha and mixed it with wine, and Mairona found she could not bear his gaze. "I tried—I did not mean—I did not know—" she blubbered, but found each thought killed by the increasing hardness and hatred in her husband's demeanor. Her efforts were halted when Morgan thrust a cup to her mouth, but she tossed her head away.

"May I at least have the privilege of taking my own poison?" she asked bitterly. Kelson nodded, and Dhugal released one of her arms, twisting the other even more violently to keep firm physical control. Wincing, she took the goblet and stilled herself with calming breaths. Anger at the unfairness of it all coursed through her, giving her the strength to dare the king's icy glare. "I will not deny that I helped put the plan in place, but all last night my mind screamed for help to put a stop to this. You lay next to me, with a hand on my arm no less, and would not listen!" she cried. His bearing did not change, did not soften. Resigning herself with difficulty, she raised the cup's brim to her lips and gulped down its bitter contents in their entirety before the drug could work into her blood.

It seemed like she was the only one breathing, and she was breathing heavily. No one else moved, no one spoke, no one else lived but her, she who would soon be condemned to death. Dhugal could not be seen behind her, but Morgan stared, and Kelson glowered in the way she had feared so greatly when she first came to Rhemuth. How different everything was now, the dream turned to cold, harsh reality.

"Oh God!" she exclaimed, falling to her knees as nausea welled and balled in her throat. Small mercy, Dhugal let her remaining arm go so she could brace herself on the floor as the tent spun at the edge of her vision. This was no mild dose designed to dull her, but a larger concentration than she had ever faced in training, promising to render her completely helpless. "Camber and Brigid be with me," was her last coherent pleading thought as she fell forward, succumbing to merasha's disruption without resistance.

Sinking to his knees, Kelson motioned Dhugal and Morgan to join him. "I would have your assistance in this unpleasant business in case there are any additional surprises that need dismantling," he said. Both dukes placed their hands on their king's shoulders as he clamped his hands around Mairona's head. Keeping his emotions tightly shuttered, he drew on his friends' strength and penetrated the whirling mess that was left of her merasha-laced mind. She convulsed in the drug-induced pain his touch caused until his ungentle will forced her to lie still.

The ruins of the massive shield wall he had discovered on her arrival at Rhemuth were substantial. It had not been constructed in a lesson with her tutor after all, but assembled with Rolf's assistance to hide the gruesome plot they had pieced together. She had doubts even then, but they were smothered by a greed to remove herself from the powerful Tirkeev's growing influence in Druimfada. She saw her path in reviving the ancient Crown of Meara, and plotted the Haldane's assassination as a means to independence more than any desire to commit treason. It was easy to bring down an unknown lowlander royal in order to free herself.

Yet that lowlander was no longer unknown, and he could not discount the guilt and grief that were shredding her soul to pieces. Her love had been genuine, and she had been honest when she

claimed never to have lied to him, for she had been ignorant of the treason she had instigated. Filing each memory, thought, and emotion away with an analytic coolness, Kelson circled the rubble of shields as he planned how to dismantle what remained.

It came apart a piece at a time, uncovering new thoughts and memories—Rolf's true character coming to unnatural light as he burned her letter explaining all to Fergal—Tirkeeve's barely checked possessive lust as he prepared his hapless co-conspirator for her bed—the shield wall's warnings causing massive headaches in Rhemuth as her actions and emotions clashed with what lie hidden—the compulsion Rolf placed, forcing her to follow through on their plans in case she changed her mind in the meantime.

She had fought that compulsion as best she could on her own, winning against it in her willingness to sacrifice herself to save the husband she had grown to love. It was hardly the act of a traitor, but that was what she was, for the compulsion would never have been placed if she had not intended regicide on her own. She was more than a simple accomplice; she had actually *planned* Kelson's assassination to achieve her own ends.

Having seen enough, Kelson moved quickly to finish his work and make sure there was no other tampering lying in wait. Satisfied, he placed the groundwork to assure that she could never hide anything from him again, that he would be able to penetrate her strongest, deepest shields at will from now on, and forced Mairona to sleep. Her distress lessened as she lost consciousness, but a more primitive torment lingered behind. Seeking its source, Kelson's attention left Mairona's mind and settled on her abdomen, where his fetal daughter grew. The little one was too unformed to think or feel real emotion, but still radiated a primal animal panic as her mother's blood filled her with madness and chaos. Kelson tried to soothe her, but she was too undeveloped to respond to anything but physical comfort and alleviation of her pain.

Forgive me, Kelson breathed to his daughter as he withdrew, shuddering. He felt his dukes' hands clamp on his shoulders in alarm, but he waved them off as he opened his eyes. "I am merely strained," he stated as he stood, shaking his head to clear it of the images that still jumbled his thoughts. Morgan's concern for him was fatherly, Dhugal's fearful, but Kelson could not bring himself to relieve them. "Remove her, and leave me," he ordered instead. They nodded wordlessly, and Dhugal lifted Mairona to his arms as the dukes withdrew.

Sighing, he turned toward his camp table, only to see his squire cowering miserably in the corner. "Dolfin?" he called softly.

"My lord," the boy gulped. "My lord, forgive me, I did like her!"

"So did I, Dolfin," Kelson answered sadly. "No one did more than I. It is alright to be confused just now. Go, I wish to be alone."

Bowing jerkily, Dolfin fled with no regard to propriety. Solitary at last, Kelson sank to the ground and bent his knees to his chin, burying his face in them as he shook with soundless grief.

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Mairona's fitful slumber was disturbed the next day by the clashing and clinking of multiple sets of armor. Her mouth was gummy, and only brute force tore her tongue away from the roof of her mouth. She could tell her eyes were dry and gritty before she opened them, and when her lids did pry apart she was greeted with blurry double vision. Squinting and blinking, she forced the eight men to reduce themselves to four, and willed her eyes to focus on them. Kelson was at the center, surrounded by Morgan, Dhugal, and Ewan.

"My lord King," her voice grated, as she rolled over and tried to push herself to her knees. He motioned to Dhugal, who knelt by her side and offered a cup.

"This will clear some of the lingering fuzziness," the coppery-haired duke stated evenly. The coldness had gone from his manner, but neither did he show friendliness. Teetering into a seated position, Mairona took the mug and drank greedily. It was water, laced with something bitter, which would either do as Dhugal said or poison her for her crime. She didn't care which she consumed. Her vision steadied and her balance centered as she finished and returned the cup.

"Thank you, my lord" she said huskily, then swung her head to bear on Kelson. It lolled back on her shoulders. "Tell me, Sire, when do I die?"

Kelson's hatred deflated at her calm acceptance even as his anger stirred at her assumption that he would execute a woman while she was with child. "You think I would murder my unborn daughter?" he returned.

"Then I have eight months," she concluded. "What of Saraid, Seanín and Fergal?"

"We found Saraid and Seanín ignorant and innocent of your crime. They are closely watched, no more. Fergal is under heavy guard, awaiting my judgment."

"I see," Mairona mumbled. "Thank you for sparing the innocent of my deeds."

"Where do your loyalties lay now?" he asked, betraying no hint of the turmoil within.

"With you, my lord," she answered without hesitation. "Whether I live or die, I choose to serve you."

There was no denying the truth of her words, for he had left no room for her to deceive him. "We shall see how strong that loyalty is," he told her. "We must go plan the assault on Druimfada Castle. Only human guards will be set outside the tent, so you will have the opportunity to run away and save yourself. However, if you are as faithful as you proclaim, you will still be here when we return."

His use of the formal, royal "we" tore at Mairona's heart. "I understand, my king," she whispered. Kelson threw a waterskin at her feet, then whirled on his heel and left the tent, motioning his dukes to join him.

Thirstier than she had ever thought possible, Mairona greedily tore the cap off the skin and drank deeply, letting its contents slosh down her chin. She gulped until she thought she would be sick, then replaced the stopper and analyzed her situation. Tears came unbidden, hanging on the tips of her lashes.

Unable to derive comfort from anything, Mairona wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked front-to-back slowly. To prove her loyalty, she must sit quietly in this tent and await— what? That achieved nothing. Kelson would besiege Druimfada for months, possibly over a year, until the castle starved itself out. She knew the food stores were full. With Kelson occupied here in the west, next year whatever new power raised itself in Torenth would have a perfect opening in the east.

Mairona knew what she must do, and took stock of her surroundings. The tent was small, and primitively appointed, but her trunk of belongings had been moved here. She opened her chest and tore it apart looking for nondescript clothes. When Kelson returned, Mairona would be gone. She was sealing her own fate, but hopefully her sacrifice would keep Gwynedd and Kelson strong.