

✘ Chapter 35 ✘

After the general's council was held, Dhugal followed Kelson back to the small tent where they had left the king. Dhugal had never seen the king in so foul a mood, and indeed all his generals had looked sideways at each other as their king repeatedly exploded, an uncharacteristic action that he had never before turned on his advisors. Even now, men scurried out of their way as the two walked through the war camp, sensing the king was not to be crossed today. Dhugal wished Kelson would speak, but he remained tight-lipped, and the coppery-haired duke knew better than to interrupt the silence.

Kelson approached the tent with dread. *Please be here, Mairí*, he pleaded as he lifted the flap and stood in the entrance. It was empty. "Dhugal, leave me," he said in a clipped voice.

"Aye, Brother. You did what you must. I shall be in my tent." Dhugal turned and sadly walked away, knowing Mairona had chosen to run and save herself. So much for Mearan mountain courage and honor.

"Damn!" Kelson exclaimed, pacing the length of the interior. "Damn, damn, damn!" He came to a stop in front of Mairona's trunk, which was still open. The plain rust-colored dress she had worn earlier was hastily discarded on top of a disheveled pile of gowns, mantles and leather. In a fit of temper, Kelson put his boot to the chest's side and kicked it over. Its contents spilled out, rust-colored linen and cotton tumbling to rest at his ankles. Bending over, he picked it up and ran its cloth through his fingers. It still held a trace of her favorite scent. "I wanted to save you, if you would only give me the chance. Why would you not let me?" Kelson closed his eyes, squeezing tears out as he allowed himself to weep in private over broken dreams that he would never partake of again.

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Mairona had only looked back once as she took her place among the trickle of refugees still leaving Druimfada. She followed them down into the valley under her town and castle, then broke off when they reached the forest. It had been a long, hard climb by foot over the long ridge that gave Druimfada its name. It was even harder negotiating the steep descent into the next valley, where she picked up the path that wound up the ridge again to a small rear postern gate not approachable from the town. Her heart pounded from more than simple exertion. She recognized the men on the wall over the entrance, who were of Druimfada and loyal, so she was safe.

"*Cuir uait!*" a soldier called to her from the wall. "*Cé atá ann?*"

"*Tá Mairona ní Dhugain, your queen,*" she replied, pulling back her hood. She knew the man, one of her sergeants. "*Dia dhuit, a Chiaran.*"

"My lady, you return safely!" Ciaran cried, recognizing her instantly. "Open the door, fools!" he called to the men below. There was a scraping sound as a bar was retracted, then the iron-reinforced oak door swung inward. Mairona strode inside as Ciaran came tumbling down a wall stair. The remaining guards secured the door behind her.

"Ciaran, how many chieftains remain?" she asked.

"Only five, my lady," he replied.

"I see. Are any loyal to Rolf?"

"Not after the burning, my lady." Ciaran spat his hatred and disgust at the deed.

"And how many Torenthi remain?"

"None, your Highness. After they set the fires, we ran them out. It was a barbarous thing they did," he replied. Mairona favored him with a charming smile.

"Good work. Now we need only bring to justice the man who gave them their orders," she told him.

"Tirkeeve is held under guard," the man answered, spitting his opinion of Rolf on the ground.

"Excellent. My captain, your cousin Seánin, was not able to join me. You will act in his stead until his return. Assemble the chieftains in the north tower in an hour."

Ciaran's eyes grew wide as he tried to assimilate all this information at once. "Aye, *go raibh maith agat*, my lady," he bowed. "May I ask a question?"

"Please." Mairona gestured him to continue.

"Where is my cousin?"

"He is safe. I know you are close." Mairona laid her hand on his arm briefly. "Seánin is in the Haldane camp."

Ciaran sucked in a breath. "We heard you had gone to the Haldane, your Highness, but I did not believe."

Mairona raised an eyebrow. "I married the Haldane." With a quirky smile, she spun on her heel with military precision and left for her quarters. Poor Ciaran gaped after her until one of his comrades jostled him, reminding him that he had orders to carry out.

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Once she reached her room and had refreshments delivered, Mairona dismissed the servants. When the door closed, her self-assured facade slipped away and revealed the very frightened eighteen-year-old girl who quivered inside. She nibbled on a dried apple, but her appetite had suddenly gone. Discarding the fruit, she picked up a clay pitcher of ale and poured it in a tankard. As she tipped the ewer, firelight glinted on the etched lion of her wedding band. Kelson. Her hand shook, and the ale spilled. "Damn," she muttered under her breath, setting the pitcher down. The dark room became stifling, so she reached out and pulled a hanging away from the window, which let in sunlight and looked over the town.

The glass distorted the view, but she could still make out the Gwyneddi camp beyond the walls, and the crimson tent that stood larger than the others. Kelson. Mairona pressed her palm against the cool glass, an intense longing filling her breast. He would have to kill her for what she did, but that was not so horrible. She had faced the prospect of death and dealt with it when she agreed to lead the new Mearan rebellion. True, she had risen against God's appointed ruler, but her confession would be sincere and He would forgive her.

She also needed Kelson's forgiveness, and that she knew she would never have. Since God was not in doubt, Kelson was the one that mattered. Shaking her head, Mairona pushed herself from the glass. It was foolish wasting time agonizing about things that could not be changed. She should be preparing for the arrival of the chieftains. Each of them was well-known to her, so this would not be difficult.

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Mairona tried to pay attention while her chieftains gave her the details about how they could

withhold a siege. A man count, food stores, rotation watches, it all blurred. She had gotten all the figures from Fergal when he joined her in the town, and it was difficult listening a second time around when her patience was tattered. She knew as well as they what a strong position they had to hold out against the king's forces. Instead, her mind worked on how to proceed with the plan she had worked out. She glanced at the five guards posted around the room, taking comfort in their presence. Their loyalty was unquestioned. Finally the list rattled to an end.

"My lords, you have my thanks. In my absence, you have kept Druimfada's keep in good order." They murmured at that, but she held up her hand for silence. "Now I must move to another matter. I have been away many months, with Rolf acting as my regent. He has since forsworn himself, and I applaud you all for taking quick action when his evil motives came to light. Now I must reaffirm your loyalty. I realize that following a lady, especially a young lady, is difficult. I did not doubt your faith before my departure, but many things have happened unexpectedly, so I must ask now. Be honest; there is no shame to an answer either way. Am I truly your ruling queen, or a figure around which to gather? Remember, I can tell if you speak truth or not. Finian?" She looked directly in his eyes.

"You have my first loyalty, my queen," the chieftain replied. "As our ancestors followed their warrior queens, so I follow you."

"Aye, legend has it that Maeve was only fourteen when she led her first army," Mairona smiled warmly and nodded to him, then turned to the next man. "Oran?"

"My loyalty lies with you, your Highness," he replied.

"Ronan?" she continued.

"I serve you, your Highness." Ronan bowed.

"And Ardal," she turned to the last. "You are Rolf's brother, so you are in a more difficult position than the others. I will not hold you any less for your honesty."

"If you are the Queen of Meara, then I must follow you," he replied.

"But who comes first?" Mairona countered. "Your brother or I?"

"You do. You are my liege," he answered. Mairona let out a small sigh.

"Good," she continued. "I needed to know that before we handle one thing. I did not expect my city to be burning when I returned."

The four men erupted in denials, all spouting simultaneously that they did not know it would happen, and everything they did to stop it. Mairona let them continue for a while, nodding as she drained her goblet. Finally she held up a hand for quiet, but each had to get his last word in. Patience gone, she slammed her goblet down on the table. The sudden noise startled the men to silence.

"Thank you," she said when she could finally talk. "I have heard all about your valiant efforts to stop the Torenthi, and how you ran them out of Druimfada. Without my knowledge or consent, Rolf took it upon himself to enter a deal with Torenth, bringing the mercenaries. He thought to use me to become King of Meara, and burned the town in revenge when it became clear I would not allow that. That is too high a price for Mearans to pay." Mairona studied Ardal closely, waiting for his reaction. He took a long while to answer.

"It is an act of treason, my lady. The penalty is clear. My brother must die," he said finally.

"Aye, he must," Mairona returned. "But he is still your brother. He will be here shortly. I will

not think any less of you if you are not."

"Thank you, your Highness, I shall remain." Ardal bowed. Mairona nodded at him.

"Now, my lords," she continued. "We shall discuss how to deal with this particular traitor."

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Rolf came sooner than expected. "Why have I been held in captivity?" he demanded as he stormed in, balance shaky from the mild merasha running in his blood to prevent Deryni assault. "Finian, Oran, what is this? I am the deputy of our queen, and you dare—"

"Silence! You shall direct your questions to me, Rolf," Mairona stated coolly. He stared at her, finally noticing her presence. "You made me your queen; now you must recognize me as one."

"You were supposed to lead the Haldane to his death!" Rolf accused. "He escaped!"

Mairona shrugged. "I changed my mind based on better knowledge of the man. You were supposed to return Druimfada to me intact."

It was Rolf's turn to be cavalier. "A necessary sacrifice."

Ronan became so angry his face turned purple. "Necessary to kill all those people? What if they were my people? What if they were yours?"

"Are we to spare them at the expense of Mearan independence?" Rolf's voice rose as his fist pounded the table. Mairona nodded, and her guards took Rolf's arms securely. "What is this?" he demanded.

"*Whatsoever you do to the least of my people, that you do unto me,*" Mairona quoted. "Shall we discuss my men whom you have imprisoned? Old men and children you have killed? Were all these necessary, too? You have committed and confessed to acts of treason. The sentence is death."

"This is madness!" Rolf's eyes went out to the other chieftains, looking for support. He found none, not even in his own brother. Finally, he smiled at Mairona. "You are barely more than a child. You do not have the ruthlessness to carry this out," he challenged her.

Coolly, Mairona slipped a dagger from Ronan's belt. "You are not the first to underestimate me, Rolf. Just ask the King of Gwynedd." Hefting the dagger, she advanced to Rolf's side and held it up for him to see. His eyes began to show fear. "Then again, you shall never have the chance. Your sentence is to be carried out immediately." With a quick jerk, she ran the blade's edge across his neck. Even though she jumped back, her hands and dress were dirtied in the initial spurt of blood. To think, she had almost done this to Kelson— The touch of warm, red liquid brought her actions to an immediate reality, breaking down her calm assurance. She nearly dropped the dagger, but clamped her fingers hard about its hilt to keep it firm as she stared at her hands, blood dripping to the floor.

"My lady," Finian called, swiftly approaching. "Are you alright?"

Mairona blinked, then looked at him. "Yes, I am fine." She turned to the soldiers and handed off the blade. "Someone bring me a cloth to wipe this off. Hang the traitor in the courtyard so all can see what happens to butchers and criminals. Then I want his head."

One of the men brought her a towel, which she used to clean herself off as best as possible. The body was quickly removed, though a pool of blood remained as testament to Rolf's execution. "Now," Mairona continued, handing the towel off. "We will discuss our future."

"We have a year before our current supplies run out," Finian assured her.

"Yes, I know, and then what?" she asked him. "Surrender now or then, what is the difference?"

"Perhaps the Lord God will grant a miracle," Ronan added. "Our cause is just."

"No, I do not think so," she replied. "In the past several months, I have come to know the King of Gwynedd very well. I have seen things—" She trailed off, taking an intentional dramatic pause. "I have seen things that leave no question in my mind that the Haldane is truly chosen by God. He is a generous and just king, and is more likely to be forgiving now than later. If I surrender the castle and you all swear honest fealty to him, you will be pardoned."

"And you, my lady?" Oran asked. "Will you agree to dying in a convent like Caitrin Quinnell?"

Mairona smiled sadly. "I have conspired to assassinate the Haldane, and he knows. He is within his full rights to execute me."

"Never!" Ronan declared vehemently.

"Peace." Mairona held up her hand. "He offered me my life, and I refused. Take heart, it will not be immediate. You see, I am now Mairona ní Dhugain de Haldane, and I carry his child." She ignored the stunned gasps, which told her that Rolf hadn't shared the news of the wedding that had angered him to acts of suicidal revenge. "Meara has always prospered under the Haldanes so long as it is loyal, so it is not a bad fate I have chosen for my land. I surrender tomorrow. If you do not agree and will not swear fealty to King Kelson, then I suggest you quit Druimfada before dawn. Now, that is all. I am very tired, and I must still see to feeding the people who remain in the town." Without ceremony Mairona left the room, leaving the chieftains to debate all that had happened.