

✠ Chapter 36 ✠

When Kelson woke the next morning, he automatically reached over for Mairona. It took several seconds for him to realize she was gone. His first wife had been murdered just as their marriage vows were finished, and now his second turned traitor. When did it end? Would he never find peace? His indulgence in self-pity was interrupted as Dolfin entered the tent, approaching the sleeping partition. Kelson sighed, then put his thoughts out of his head so he could start his day.

"Good morrow, Sire," Dolfin greeted. "A messenger has come from the castle, and will speak only to your Highness."

Kelson threw the furs back. He was still sleeping in his brigandine armor, so there was no need to dress. "Pour me some wine, then show the man in."

The messenger was a short, brown-haired man. He was too small to be a soldier, but his short stature made him a light rider for fast horseback travel. "Your Highness," the man greeted, kneeling on the ground.

"Rise," Kelson beckoned. The messenger did so gladly. "You were sent by Mairona?"

"Aye, my lord," the man returned.

"What does our errant wife want?"

The messenger bowed his head in respect before answering. "Her ladyship wishes a safe conduct into the town to meet with your Highness."

"For what purpose?" Kelson wondered.

"That I do not know, my lord."

Sighing, Kelson refilled his own goblet from the wineskin. "Safe conduct is granted so long as she only brings ten men for escort, but we will not meet her in the town. We shall be outside the main gate in two hours. You may leave now."

"I thank your Highness," the messenger bowed, and then exited the tent.

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Kelson deployed a good portion of his army around the gate, inside and out. After he had been wounded at the tunnel entrance, he wasn't about to trust Mairona's good will. She rode through his men with her four chieftains and six soldiers, who all looked warily around them, waiting for the Gwyneddi soldiers to pounce. Mairona raised her hand, bidding them to wait at the gate's damaged mouth as she advanced alone, waiting for Kelson. He went to meet her, followed closely by Dhugal, Morgan, Ewan, and his personal bodyguards. When he halted before her, he was surprised at how haggard she looked. A small corner deep inside felt concern as she attempted a smile, but it was swiftly extinguished by fury as his mind turned to the circumstances leading to this meeting..

"Good day, my king," she hailed.

"We are disappointed yet again, my lady," he returned coolly. "You have shown us you serve only yourself."

Mairona looked surprisingly stricken. "If that were true, I would remain a prisoner in your camp!" she shot back, then forced herself to take a deep breath.

"Explain yourself!" he demanded shortly.

A quick breath restored the mask of diplomacy on her face, and she once again turned into a Mearan mountain chieftain, bargaining for the future of her people. "I believe true loyalty goes beyond blindly obeying orders. If I had done as you asked, you would be involved in a siege that could last months. Druimfada has supplies to hold out until next summer, giving Torenth a perfect opportunity in the east if someone rises to consolidate power before Liam can be crowned. I am certain you wish to avoid a war on two fronts," she stated.

"Then how do you propose to end this, Madame?" Kelson asked. Mairona nearly winced at how emotionlessly he referred to her.

"I surrender Druimfada to your mercy, my lord. The remaining chieftains who ride with me are prepared to swear fealty to you, and will remain loyal for the duration of their lives. I urge you to show them mercy."

Kelson didn't allow himself to look surprised. "Is Rolf among them?"

"Aye." She motioned a soldier forward, who revealed a severed head on a wooden pole as Mairona continued. "There were no pikes to be found, so I had to settle for a spear."

A partially raised eyebrow showed a tiny hint of amusement as Kelson regarded the head and his wife. "So you did have him executed."

"I am baroness and chieftain here. I slit his throat myself," she spat. Kelson stared at her, shocked. "My lord, do you not recall my tales of border patrol?"

"Aye." He swallowed. "What do you exact in return for the castle?"

"I demand nothing for Druimfada. It is yours," she replied, "but as a wife, I do ask two things of my lord husband."

"What are they?"

"The first—" The mask of chieftain slipped away, taking her unawares. She found it difficult to continue until she looked away. "The first is that, if your daughter is born live, you allow me some time before she is taken from me."

"You will have one month. It could be dangerous to move the babe before then, anyway. And the second?"

Mairona's voice grew much quieter. "I know that as king you must execute me for what I have done. Yet I would still ask for my husband's forgiveness." She choked on the last word, fighting tears.

Kelson felt a well of sympathy rise in his chest, but consciously quenched it. This was a matter of State, and compassion could easily turn deadly. "We shall speak of that later. Three hundred of my men will secure the castle from your garrison. When the bells ring Nones I will accept your formal surrender in the hall. All men who swear fealty to me and swear it true will be pardoned. Later, in private, I will tell you of your fate."

"Aye, my lord. You have Druimfada's gratitude, and mine as well. Your men shall encounter no resistance," she responded.

"Until later, my lady." Kelson nodded his head, then wheeled his horse to give his men their orders.

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The surrender went smoothly, and all men who swore fealty spoke truly. Still, Kelson couldn't help but notice that they all looked to Mairona as if for confirmation before kneeling to him. Now that was all taken care of, and it was time to deal with his wife in the north tower. Mairona followed him into the room at the top, surrounded by Kelson's bodyguards who watched her closely. They had stripped her of all possible weapons, including her eating dagger and a hairpin that was considered overly sharp. Kelson made no move to stop them.

When they reached the tower room, which also served as Mairona's bedchamber, Kelson ordered the guards stationed at the room's perimeter before having the door shut behind them. Then he turned to Mairona. She looked very small and deathly frightened.

"What am I to do with you?" he asked.

"I thought that was clear. I planned regicide and then disobeyed you," she answered in a soft voice. "You must execute me." Blinking back tears, she hung her head and twisted it away from him.

Kelson regarded her for a few moments before answering. "I cannot bring myself to do that," he admitted finally. "You fought compulsion to save my life, and you have worked to bring a peaceful end to this conflict."

A glimmer of hope shone in Mairona's eyes. "Then you do forgive me!"

"Do not ask for more. I am giving you your life."

Her face fell, but she still did not look as forlorn as when she had welcomed him inside the castle. "Then what will become of me?"

"I confess I do not know. You are not as clear-cut a case as Fergal ó Hearne."

Mairona exploded. "How can you spare my life and take his? He had no part in the tunnel trap. What has he done that is any worse than the chieftains whom you pardoned?"

"He did not plan my assassination, no, but he did intend to use it to his advantage," Kelson countered. "You warned me and saved my life. He planned to marry you once I was out of the way."

Mairona's rage interrupted him. "If that is the worst he has done, you may as well behead or hang me, Finian, Ronan, Ornan, and Ardal at Fergal's side!" she screamed.

"You will hold your tongue!" Kelson shouted back, face deadly. Even though they had fought before, this was the first time he had ever yelled at her. She stood stunned, fear flooding back. Taking a calming breath, Kelson continued at a lower volume. "He pledged his faith to me and then broke his vow. None of the other chieftains had sworn fealty directly to me, and so I show them mercy as long as they keep faith in the future. I will not risk my kingdom by allowing any man who wishes my death to keep his life. Fergal is being brought here, and you will be present when I deal with him."

Mairona just glared at him. She would live, but Kelson was simply using her as Queen of Meara to lend authority to his presence in a land where not everyone welcomed him as their king. "I do not like this," she said fiercely.

"I am not asking you to like it. Would you rather I hang the lot of you?" Kelson returned.

"No." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "I will play my role dutifully."

"Then—" Kelson was interrupted by a knock at the door. "Enter," he called.

Five of his guards led Fergal in. He was unbound, but clearly a prisoner. His eyes darted around the room, eyeing Kelson with thinly-veiled hatred, then rested on the queen with surprise.

"Mairona! What are you doing here!" he exclaimed.

"You will address me as 'your Highness.' I am Mairona ní Dhugain de Haldane, Queen Consort of Gwynedd, and my place is at my king's side," she replied, walking to her husband. Kelson dispassionately nodded his approval.

"She has demonstrated her loyalty, even as you broke your vow of fealty," Kelson accused, eyeing him coldly. "I Read you in camp, so do not bother lying to me. You want me dead, not for visions of a glorious, independent Meara, but simply for the sake of my wife."

Fergal turned his eyes to Mairona. "Have you anything to say for me?"

"Nothing," she replied flatly, nothing but the chieftain's judgment showing on her face, but inside her heart was dying. This was the man she had played with as a child, held in affection as a brother as they grew, and to bring peace to her people she must betray and condemn him. Fergal's eyes turned wild as he stared at her, then darted frantically around the room for escape. Mairona knew he was up to something, but even she was stunned when he whipped a dagger out of a guard's belt and flung it at the king before he could be restrained.

It was so quick, Kelson never saw it coming. Mairona had recognized the wild mountain warrior in his dangerous eyes, and she was brutally aware of Fergal's desperate act. Everything seemed frozen except for the blade that hurled end over end through the air. "KELSON!!!" she shrieked as she flung herself at him, hoping desperately to knock his motionless form out of the way.

Kelson was just beginning to realize what Fergal had done when he staggered under Mairona's sudden weight. Her mouth opened and her eyes gaped as the dagger pierced her back, sinking into her flesh. "NOOOOOOO!!!" he screamed as he caught her, slowly lowering her to the floor. "Two of you get Morgan and Dhugal!" he snapped to his guards. "And stand away from that murderer!"

They complied quickly, the two closest to the door running for help as those surrounding Fergal backed away warily. Fergal sagged to his knees, stunned and disconsolate that his beloved Mairona would give her own life for this lowland upstart who dared intrude in their native Meara. That shock turned to fear as Kelson narrowed a hateful gaze on the chieftain and raised his hand. A bolt of crimson fire, a legacy of his Haldane heritage, leapt from Kelson's palm to engulf Fergal, and the Mearan chieftain twitched in spasms of agony before slumping to the floor.

"Mairí?" Kelson's voice trembled as he cradled her body, mindful of the hilt protruding from under her shoulder blade. She blinked at him.

"So I die after all," she whispered painfully.

"No, not yet," he insisted. "Stay with me, Mairí. Help is coming."

"So many things I never planned for those months ago—" She was interrupted by a painful coughing spasm. Blood flecked on her lips.

"Sshhh, do not speak," he whispered, smoothing her hair out of her face. "Save your strength."

Mairona shifted to mind-speech. *But I must tell you. I never dreamed I would love you.* And— The words broke off as her eyes went glassy. *Kelson, I cannot see you!* she cried.

A disturbingly large puddle of blood was growing on the floor, bringing back painful memories of the first wife who died in Kelson's arms. Sidana's lifeless face was superimposed by Mairona's in his mind's eye, shifting endlessly back and forth from wife to wife. "Damn it, Mairí, I will not lose you, too!" he sobbed. Her head slumped back as she lost awareness, before she could hear his next words. "I do forgive you, Mairí. I love you." Kelson held her close, his tears mingling with her blood as he prayed for help to arrive, and feared it was already too late. Both his wife and unborn child were bleeding to death, and for all the vast power he held in his hands, temporal and metaphysical, there was nothing he could do.