

✠ Chapter 37 ✠

It seemed like an eternity before Morgan and Dhugal burst into the tower room, panting heavily from their sprint to the tower and up the stairs. Kelson's head was bowed helplessly over Mairona's limp body, but he looked up tearfully at their arrival.

"You must save her, please," he begged, moving a little so Morgan could begin to examine the wound.

"What about him?" Dhugal asked, jerking his head in Fergal's direction.

"He is dead." Kelson's voice trailed off as he could no longer contain the threatening sobs. Dhugal gently pulled his blood brother away from Mairona so he could assist Morgan.

"The dagger pierced her lung, and has weakened the wall of a major blood vessel," the older duke analyzed, holding his hands above the wound. "She has lost much blood already, and will spill more when we extract the dagger. We will do what we can, but it is too early to tell if she will live."

"No!" Kelson shook his head vehemently. "I will not lose my wife and my child!"

Dhugal looked up at him. "Then get a hold of yourself and let us work!" he said sharply before he slipped into rapport with Morgan. It took some effort to extract the dagger, which had embedded itself in bone. Once it finally wrenched free, blood pumped out of the gash with amazing volume. Kelson jumped forward, but restrained himself and stayed back as Morgan and Dhugal repaired the damage and closed the hole.

When they finished, Kelson scrambled to kneel at Mairona's head. "Is she alright?" he asked, caressing her face.

"There is no immediate danger, but she has lost a perilous amount of blood." Morgan told him, wiping sticky red hands on his tunic. "If she wakes, she will live. If not, she will die in her sleep. We can only wait."

"And the babe?" Kelson asked, anguish etched in his face.

"Also alive," Dhugal interjected. "If Mairona lives, the child has a chance."

Kelson lifted his wife, rocking her. "It should have been me. Dear Lord, it was meant for me. Fergal tried to kill me with that dagger, and she threw herself in the way to save me." His voice choked in sobs as he buried his face in Mairona's hair.

Dhugal laid a comforting hand on his king's shoulder. "Kel, you told me that you had felt the moment when God blessed your marriage. If He did something so obviously visible then, I do not believe he would take Mairona this quickly." Kelson looked up at him with hope as Dhugal continued. "You really should call some attendants up to remove these bloody rags and make her comfortable."

"Aye," Kelson replied distractedly, still pondering what Dhugal had said. "See to it, Brother." Dhugal squeezed his shoulder in sympathy before he and Morgan left to discard their own soiled clothing, softly closing the door behind them.

* * * * *

"Kelson is more frightened than I have ever seen him, Alaric" Dhugal confessed as they wound down the spiral stair. "Yesterday I could have killed Mairona with my own hands, but now I pray to God she will live."

Morgan shook his head. "I admit that after Mairona revealed she had masterminded the ambush, I suspected she had run away and then surrendered Druimfada for her own personal motives. You and I have now seen her mind, and I still have difficulty believing that she did it for love and loyalty."

"After this, what else could it be? You do not throw yourself in front of an assassin's dagger for personal gain." Dhugal was quiet for a while. "I wonder if I raised Kelson's hopes too high."

"No," Morgan answered. "Experience has cruelly taught him what the dangers are. This time he needs something to grasp at." They reached the bottom of the stair and Dhugal pushed open the door to the central courtyard.

"I had better find Mairona's ladies, if any remain" Dhugal stated.

"After you do, and change your clothing, you should return to Kelson," Morgan told him. "He feels most comfortable talking to you."

"Aye," Dhugal nodded seriously. "I plan on being his shadow."

* * * * *

Kelson took up vigil at Mairona's bedside, doing all necessary work and taking his meals there. Dhugal was ever-present, leaving only when Morgan came to relieve him. Kelson knew they were worried and watching over him, but he normally didn't mind their company so long as they let him sit in silence. Two days had passed, and still Mairona showed no sign of improving. Kelson sat by her bed, her hand held protectively between his own. He had sent Dhugal and Morgan off for the afternoon meal in the hall, wanting relief from their prying concern.

There was a commotion outside Mairona's chamber. The sound was muffled by the door, but he could hear one of his guards say, "Be on your way, boy. Go on."

A child's voice protested. "No! I see Myree now!"

Kelson released his wife's hand and moved to open the door. He was confronted with the sight of two guards trying to catch a squirming three-year-old boy holding a wooden soldier. "What is this?" he asked.

"My deepest apologies, your Highness," one of the guards said sheepishly. "We will remove him presently."

The other guard finally got a hold on the boy, and hoisted him off the ground. "Back to the hall with you," he said. The child started screaming at the top of his lungs.

"No! I see Myree now! Give Myree soldier! No! No hall! See Myree!" The boy repeated himself over and over again. Kelson wondered if he would stop to breathe, especially when his face turned dark red.

"Wait," Kelson told the guards. "Put him down." The child was set back on the ground, and he sulked as he hugged his toy soldier tightly to his chest. Kelson crouched down to the boy's level to meet his childish frown.

"What is your name?" he asked gently.

"Cian," the boy pouted.

"You want to see Mairí?" Kelson smiled gently at the boy, who nodded. "Why?" he continued.

"Myree my cousin. I give her soldier," Cian replied, holding out the wooden figure for Kelson to admire. Its paint was worn, and the spear it had once held was broken off.

"That is a very good soldier," Kelson appraised. "Why does Mairí need it?"

"I have bad dreams. Myree give soldier to protect me. Now I give Myree soldier."

"I think she would like that," Kelson smiled reassurance at the boy as he took the small hand. "Come. We will go see Mairí."

Cian shot a challenging look at the guard who had tried to carry him away. "See Myree!" he insisted, then looked at Kelson as he was led into the room. "Who are you?" the child asked innocently.

"I am Mairí's husband. My name is Kelson," he replied.

"Like the king," the boy grinned, proud to demonstrate his knowledge.

"Aye, like the king," Kelson agreed.

"You know the king?" Cian wondered, craning his neck back to look up. Kelson knelt down again so the boy wouldn't have to strain.

"Aye, Cian. I am the king."

"Ooooooh." Cian looked at Kelson with awe, then frowned as he reconsidered. "You not look like the king."

Kelson chuckled. "Do I need a crown?" The boy nodded, so Kelson crossed over to one of his trunks and rummaged through it. He withdrew one of his more elaborate circlets and put it on. "Is that better?"

"Aye." Cian's head bounced up and down vehemently. "Now you are king."

Laughing, Kelson put the crown back in the trunk and closed the lid. "Can you keep a secret, Cian?"

"Aye, King— Lord—" Cian's little face screwed up in confusion. "What do I call you?"

"When other people are around, you must call me 'my lord.' But since we are alone, you may call me Kelson," he smiled.

"Kelson. Tell me secret."

Kelson motioned the boy over, and picked him up to whisper in his ear. "Crowns make my head hurt." Cian giggled and squirmed down to the ground. Smiling, Kelson realized how much he had needed his spirits raised. This small boy had done it so easily that he found himself longing for his own children, and thought of the daughter whose life hung in the same balance as her mother's. Would she live? Would he ever have the chance to have other children?

"See Myree," Cian insisted again, tugging at Kelson's hand.

"Yes, we will see Mairí now." Kelson led the boy up to the large bed and pulled the curtains back. He lifted Cian onto the feather mattress so he could see.

"Myree," Cian called, shaking her arm.

"She will not wake, Cian," Kelson told him sadly.

"Is she dead?" The boy's face turned around, looking solemnly at Kelson.

"No, she is only sleeping," he reassured the child. "Somebody hurt her very badly, and she must sleep so her body can heal."

"Oh." Cian very carefully placed his wooden soldier on top of Mairona's sleeping form. "There. Soldier protect Myree."

"He will do a very good job," Kelson said. Someone rapped at the door. "Come," he called. One of his guards entered.

"Pardon me, my lord. The boy's mother is here," the man said.

"Let her in," Kelson said, lifting Cian off the bed. The woman who entered looked very frightened, curtseying and wringing her hands as she looked for her son. Cian cried "Mama!" and ran to her.

"Your Highness, I am terribly sorry. I should have kept a closer eye on him," she told him in a trembling voice.

"There is no need to apologize. Far be it from me to stand in the way of a young man on a vital mission." Kelson winked at Cian, who grinned. His mother relaxed somewhat, but she still trembled.

"I give Myree soldier, Mama," he beamed proudly.

"You have my thanks, Sire. Cian, thank his Highness," she instructed her son. To her dismay, he ran forward and threw his arms around Kelson's legs.

"Thank you," Cian said to Kelson's knees. Chuckling, he picked the boy up.

"Would you like to see Mairí again tomorrow?" Kelson asked. The boy nodded, then Kelson handed him over to his mother. "Cian said he and Mairona are cousins. How are you related?" he asked.

"For the lad, 'tis through marriage, your Highness. I am Muireann, her Ladyship's aunt and sister to her late father. I was wed nearly two years ago to young Cian's father, Cian of Scairbh, so the boy is now my stepson," the woman offered timidly.

Kelson frowned in puzzlement. "Mairona told me she had no family left alive."

Awkwardness crossed Muireann's features. "My birth was not legitimate," she mumbled. "I am not true family."

Kelson was not certain how to recover from that. "You still have blood-ties, and you are welcome with Cian. Mairona loves her people of Druimfada very much. Maybe their closeness will help her heal."

"Thank you, your Highness. May I take my leave?" The woman was still obviously uncomfortable in his presence.

"Of course, Muireann. Good day."

The woman remembered to curtsey before she left. Kelson was alone again, so he resumed his vigil at Mairona's side.