

## ✠ Chapter 39 ✠

On his return to the keep, Kelson raced to the north tower and up the spiral stair to Mairona's side. Her physician still attended, but he withdrew from his patient as the king swooped through the room and sat on the edge of the feathered mattress. Mairona's eyes were open, but she gibbered nonsensically to the top of the canopy. "How fares she?" Kelson asked the physician.

"The queen is awake, Sire, as you can see," the man answered. "She is not aware of her surroundings, and seems to be hallucinating. I have given her a potion to sedate her."

Nodding, Kelson took one of his wife's hands. "Mairí?" he called gently. "Can you hear me?"

"Die, die, die," she muttered. "I must die. Mercy, God, mercy me, Christ, forgive, die—"

"Mairona, *a stoirín*, can you hear me? I am with you," he told her, smoothing her hair around her face. She gave no notice of his presence.

"Christ forgive—Brigid protect—I love him—I cannot kill—Druimfada help, must, save, peace—"

"Mairí," he whispered, bending over to kiss her forehead. Her eyes snapped onto his, growing wide in horror.

"Demon!" she cried. "The demon comes! Kill the Haldane! Rid the evil demon!"

Jerking back, Kelson released her as he grew pale. She turned her back to him, curling around her legs as she squeezed her knees and started weeping. "Forgive, Christ, forgive, I murdered my husband! I love—"

Swallowing audibly, Kelson retreated from the bed and looked at the physician.

"She does not know of what she speaks," the man said fearfully.

"I wonder," Kelson responded quietly, his face ashen stone.

"Shall—" the man's voice caught, and he had to clear his throat before he could continue. "Shall I inform your Highness when she has improved? My lord's presence may not upset her then."

"Nay," Kelson shook his head. "There is no need. I shall not return."

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Druimfada's small chapel was dark in the evening, lit sparsely in flame. The presence lamp burned behind the altar, and there was a small candelabrum of white memorial candles that burned in memory of the departed Dugains. A larger collection of mismatched candles was lit and placed in sand as offering for the people who had died in Rolf's occupation. The space was empty of any other people, thanks to the two guards posted outside the entrance.

Kelson's head was bowed over his hands. Unbound raven hair spilled forward on either side of his face, waving gently from the border braid he usually wore, hiding lips moving silently in rote prayer. It was supposed to have a calming effect, but didn't still the turmoil raging within. Giving up, he sat back on his heels and waited for Dhugal to arrive.

It was thoughts of Mairona that disturbed his meditations. Several days had passed since that disquieting visit, and he was still reeling. Word had been sent that she had improved, was

aware of the people around her and no longer hallucinating, but he was true to his word and did not return. A part of her still wanted him dead. It must, or why would she have said such things? A part of him still hated her.

Dhugal finally arrived and was passed through the guards. Kelson turned around and sat on the low prie-dieu, stretching his legs out along the ground. Dhugal noted with surprise the primitive black leathers he wore. "Kel, you look like a frightful figure out of ancient Mearan legend," he quipped.

"Do I play the part of demon king well?" Kelson returned sourly.

Sobering instantly, Dhugal sat on the cold stone floor opposite his king. Only at this proximity did he see how pale and drawn Kelson's face was. "I am listening, Brother," the duke said as he settled.

"I am a fool," Kelson declared.

"Then so are we all," Dhugal told him. "None of us suspected."

"I dared to dream. Kings are not allowed such luxuries."

"Now you are wallowing," the duke accused.

"Aye. Indulge me." Sighing, Kelson rested his elbows on his knees and covered his face in his hands. "I loved her, Dhugal, and would have given her anything. *Khadasa*, I still love her."

"I know," Dhugal said softly. "As difficult as it is to believe, she is devoted to you. That is why she took the blade meant for you."

"That is the problem. I cannot keep a traitorous wife, and I cannot condemn to death a lady who nearly gave her life for my own. What am I to do?"

Dhugal's stone seat was uncomfortably hard, but he did not move. "You will do what you must."

Kelson pulled his hands from his face and looked heavenward. "Why does everyone always say that?"

"Because you are the king. A very good one."

Snorting, Kelson looked his brother-duke in the eye. "Aye. Wonderful. I am such a good king that I let my first wife be murdered at the altar by her own brother. My second intended bride married my traitor cousin, and on the third try, my wife betrayed me. Tell me again how good I am." Dhugal knew he couldn't counter with anything that would comfort Kelson, so he waited for the king to continue. "I rejoiced greatly when she awoke. It seemed I could not go to her side soon enough. When I entered her chamber she said she loves me, begs forgiveness. But then she saw me and screamed for the death of the demon king. She still wants me dead."

Tilting his head to the side, Dhugal considered how to answer that. "It must be the drugs making her say that. Alaric and I both saw her true mind when we Healed her. Mairona is devastated by what she has done, Kel. If there were anything she could do to change the past, she would not hesitate."

"So you side with her," Kelson said coolly.

"No, Brother," Dhugal stated evenly. "I am always with you. I merely thought you should not be left guessing at her motives."

"You do not make this any easier." The king looked away in disgust.

"Kelson," Dhugal said. He didn't turn back, so Dhugal kicked his boot until he got the king's attention. "Kelson, you need time apart from her to sort this all out."

"Aye—" A new look of purpose came over the king's face. "Aye, you are right. 'Tis best for her to remain here, but I cannot leave her alone. God knows what else she might concoct if left on her own."

"I am your viceroy here in Meara, so I will stay and watch over her," Dhugal offered. Kelson smiled and leaned forward to clasp his brother's hand.

"Thank you. I know how you must want to return to Ailín. You are the truest friend a man could have. I will leave for Laas in the morning, to reaffirm the allegiance of my Mearan lords, and then return to Rhemuth. You will have authority over Mairona, but let her feel she is handling Druimfada's affairs. Since her trust is still not assured, see that you know everything she does. Make sure she does not leave the castle alone, and see she does not leave the town without you."

"That is good," Dhugal nodded. "Now you only have to tell her."

"Aye, the easy part." He grinned bitterly, getting to his feet. Dhugal's bottom had gone numb from the hard stone, so Kelson gave him a hand up. "There is a portal here somewhere that Mairona's tutor created. You should find it, for you can use it to escape to Rhemuth for short periods. That will keep you occupied while I jump into the fire pit."

"The portal will make things easier," Dhugal commented, "but I will locate it later. If you need me, I will be making arrangements in the hall."

"Thank you, Brother," Kelson said softly. He raised the palm of his hand, displaying the scar that gave testament to their childhood blood-oath.

"Always, Brother," Dhugal returned, lifting his own mark. Kelson smiled, then took a deep breath as he left to face his wife.

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Mairona proved to be a fiery Mearan lass as she regained her strength quickly. As soon as she was well enough to speak her mind, she refused any large doses of potion her physician concocted, wanting to take control of Druimfada again from her bedchamber. The drug-induced dreams she recently had left her shaken, and taking care of her people was all she had to keep herself from thinking about Kelson.

He had come to her, when she had first awakened. Her mind had been foggy with medication, but she still remembered his initial relief and joy giving way to uncertainty and distress, until finally he fled. Mairona had been unable to leave her rooms to seek him out, and he never returned. If only he would come, and she could explain, she believed it would comfort. It hurt deeply that he stayed away and wouldn't even send word. However, it was no one's doing but her own. The only way to relieve that empty ache was to immerse herself in work.

Rebuilding and supplies were less of a problem now, thanks to Morgan's apt administration to the town, so she had turned to other matters. Business such as the list of Mearan traitors who had helped the Torenthi burn her town. The names were few, and none surprised her. One interesting entry was Saraid's husband, the man who had beaten her simply for being Deryni. Mairona had smiled to herself when she saw that name. Now her attendant and friend could be free.

Her guards brought him to her for an "audience," the only personal interview she granted for anyone on the list. No wanting to show her continued weakness, Mairona left her bed and sat in a chair ornate enough to be a throne. Surrounded by guards, the man stood before her, wary but confident in his self-righteousness as he answered her questions and openly confessed to his part in the destruction. She loathed him.

"Why murder your own people?" Mairona asked coldly.

"The witch would ask me why?" he sneered. "A good Christian woman would know. 'Tis better to purify the soul with fire than to burn eternally in hell. These people do not fear you Deryni. Your taint has corrupted all Druimfada!"

"All Druimfada? My, that is a large accusation."

Mairona sucked in a breath as she recognized her husband's voice. So, he had finally come. Arms crossed, Kelson leaned casually in the doorway to the stair, arms crossed easily, but his eyes were dark and narrowed in a way that did not match his relaxed pose. His black leathers and unbound sable hair made her recall the primitive, bloodthirsty, and vengeful chieftains out of Mearan history. Saraid's husband showed the first signs of fear as Kelson continued.

"If my queen can damn all Druimfada, then I must have the honor of corrupting a whole kingdom. 'Tis a shame the Church does not agree with you."

"My lord," Mairona greeted without rising, thankful that her voice remained strong and clear without betraying emotion. "This man along with others on this list helped burn Druimfada." She offered a piece of parchment to him.

Kelson slowly walked over and took the list. His eyebrows furrowed as he studied it briefly, then he folded it and tucked it in his belt. "I will take care of them. All of them," he added, looking pointedly at Saraid's husband.

"My men have arrested everyone on that roll. I surrender them to your justice, Sire," she told him. Her hands gripped the arms of her chair.

"Remove him, and leave us alone," Kelson ordered the Mearan guards in dismissal.

"Aye, your Highness," the captain bowed, escorting the prisoner out. The Mearans all left, leaving king and queen on their own. Kelson clasped his hands behind his back and walked to the window.

Now they were in private, Mairona's public facade vanished. "Forgive me, my lord, but I cannot rise from this chair."

"You should be resting in bed, not concerning yourself with such things," he admonished her.

"I must," she replied simply. "Would you do any differently?"

"No, but I do not have the care of an unborn child." He looked out the window, trying to calm the storm of emotion inside. Part of him wanted to hold her in his arms and tell her everything would be fine, just the way it was before. Part hated her and never wanted to see her again. A more rational part realized that though the hate would fade sooner than love, he could not trust her. Not now, perhaps not ever. It had been so much easier when her life hung in the balance, and he could allow his passion to overshadow everything else while her survival was in question. Now that she would live, he must face her deeds, and the open forgiveness he offered as she nearly bled to death had vanished in her sedated, half-aware ramblings, displaced by grief and a swiftly growing anger. Bowing his head, he noticed a single gray hair contrasting starkly against black. *I*

*am too young for this*, he thought in disgust. Winding it around his finger, he yanked it out and let it fall.

Mairona was immersed in her own emotional turmoil. As much love as she felt for him, she knew he had little choice but to annul their marriage. He could have the bishops do it in good conscience, since she had been under compulsion when she spoke her vows. It didn't matter that she would swear those vows again now that she was free. Yes, ultimately it would be better for Kelson and Gwynedd if another lady were queen, and that was quietly killing her. "Words are inadequate. I cannot begin to tell you how sorry I am— "

Kelson cut her off, though he did not look at her. "What is done is done and must be dealt with. I cannot allow you to keep your lands here. You are stripped of your title as Baroness, and Druimfada now is held by the Crown. I appoint you as regent, and you shall stay here to carry out those duties."

Mairona closed her eyes as tears fell freely. So, he would not lock her up in a nunnery. "Thank you," she whispered. "I shall not fail you again."

Turning, Kelson watched her a few moments. He forced himself to feel no emotion. "I leave on the morrow for Laas to allow the Mearan lords to reaffirm their fealty. From there I will continue on to Rhemuth."

"You will not return?" Her voice caught, and a snuffle betrayed her.

"No." Kelson took a deep breath. "Dhugal will remain to assist you."

"To be my keeper, you mean," Mairona retorted, then instantly regretted it. "I am sorry. You have been kinder than I deserve. Forgive me if I hope for more, for—" She took a shuddering breath, unable to say the word *you*. "When I was injured, I dreamt you came to me. You sat at my bedside and held my hand, telling me you forgave me. It gave me comfort. Forgive me for wishing it were more than a dream." She choked back a sob, hiding her face in her hand.

"I did sit vigil in this room, praying for you," Kelson said coolly. Mairona looked at him, her tear-stained face showing between her fingers as he continued. "May God have mercy on me, for I cannot forgive."

"Oh, Kelson!" she cried. Now that he had delivered his message, Kelson found that in his anger he detested her presence, so he left without a word. Mairona slid to the floor, sobbing her heart out as what remained of her world shattered around her. Once piece still held in place, and that was Druimfada, but it no longer gave comfort.