

✘ Chapter 40 ✘

When Kelson had left the town walls, Dhugal climbed the tower stairs to Mairona's chamber. He knocked, and Saraïd opened the door for him. "My lord," she whispered as she curtsied. He nodded and entered the room. Mairona sat by an open window, watching Kelson and his army depart. She turned to him with puffy, red eyes.

"Dhugal. I have asked the servants to prepare Halek's old quarters for you, and glass is being imported to install in the windows. There is a transfer portal there, which you may use to report to Kelson. You will also want to guard it from the likes of me." She watched him sadly.

He pulled up a stool, sitting a small distance from her. "Ye're nae prisoner, Mairona."

"No?" she forced a laugh. "Then what are the terms of my so-called freedom?"

Dhugal took a breath before answering, border burr touching his speech now that Kelson and the need for court manners were gone. "Ye're regent in name, but I'm tae know all decisions concernin' greater than household matters. I may overrule ye. I'm tae see all correspondence, written an' otherwise. Ye willnae leave the castle without an escort of my choosin', an' ye're not tae leave the town without me."

"A prison without walls," she mused, then focused on him. "Forgive me, I should not complain. By all rights I should be scheduled for a hanging." He had no response to that, so she continued. "Bring Ailín here, or rumors may start that the king's wife is sharing the bed of his sworn brother. He trusts you, of course, but I would not cause him any more pain."

"That is wise," he agreed. "She can also be your companion."

"I have precious few of those." Mairona pulled a handkerchief from the folds of her dress and dabbed her nose. "Tell me, I must know. How much does Kelson hate me?"

The copper-haired duke thought for a moment. "He'll be angry," Dhugal finally responded. "Angrier than I hae e'er seen. He doesnae offer blind trust tae many, an', weel—I dinnae think, though, that he will hate ye lang."

"In a way, that makes it worse. I know I hurt him deeply, and it is tearing me apart in little pieces. If I could do anything to change what I have done I would not hesitate, and I wish he understood that. The king must condemn me, but I mourn the loss of my husband." Her voice quavered on the last word, and she turned her head quickly away.

Dhugal rose and rested a hand on her shoulder. "Give his anger time tae cool. Then maybe he'll listen tae ye." Mairona refused to cry in front of him, but she was perilously on the edge. Biting her fist, she twisted her face away as far as she could. Dhugal saw she was not going to reply, and sensed she wanted to be alone. "Good day, my lady. I'll leave ye." She didn't say a word, so he took his hand from her shoulder and went away.

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Kelson's spirits lifted when he rode through the castle gates at Rhemuth. Home at last! The business at Laas had taken nearly five months, fishing out more traitors. Ever since Meara came under Gwynedd's control, rebels had raised their heads every few years. His father Brion used to call his own regular ventures into that hilly country "spring cleaning," which was rather apt. Kelson had disbanded the army as soon as was safely possible to prevent a further drain on his treasury, but insisted on remaining in Laas to personally make sure Meara would not trouble him for many years to come. This rugged, mountainous land seemed to harbor a poison that Haldanes had

trouble rooting out. It had even infected his wife.

Now it was all behind him, and he was back in familiar surroundings. November's gray skies had fallen on Gwynedd, the beginning of a quiet season that sometimes lasted to Christmas court. Soon he could easily fall back into a routine that would keep him from dwelling on his Mearan queen. In the immediate future, however, he had to endure the celebration of his return from the longest absence he had ever taken from Rhemuth. In a few days there would also be his birthday feast and the anniversary of his coronation. Hopefully afterwards there would be some peace for him to enter his twenty-first year and the seventh year of his reign.

A long journey had tired him, so he kept the welcoming court brief. As soon as was proper, he escaped up to his rooms for a much needed bath and relaxation. Weary legs pumped up the solar's spiral stair as his aunt and uncle followed. "Kelson, there is something you must know," Nigel started as they neared the top.

The king stopped and turned lethargically. "Uncle, if it can wait, let it. I am very tired and would appreciate no distractions as I wash the stink of the road away."

"Very well, 'tis not urgent" Nigel agreed, hoping his nephew wouldn't run into the subject of his "news" before he was warned.

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A good, hot bath next to the fire and a long night's sleep left Kelson refreshed the next morning. He was slightly chagrined that he slept through Mass, but his body had needed the rest badly. He would have to confess to Father Duncan later, but surely God could not begrudge his faithful servant some recovery time. After a light repast, he exited his chambers to the solar, hoping it was the beginning of a thoroughly uneventful morning.

The sound of a young child's laughter immediately caught his attention—it must be his small cousin Eirian. The few ladies in the solar were turned away from him, they and his aunt absorbed in the antics of a black-haired toddler. "Aunt Meraude?" he called, catching her attention.

"Kelson!" she returned, then turned to her attendants. "Leave us," she commanded as she scooped up the squealing child. As they complied, Kelson's stomach did somersaults when he realized this child was too small and dark-skinned to be little Eirian.

"Aunt?" he asked, gesturing to the child. Meraude looked unusually nervous and uncertain.

"Kelson—" she started.

"What?" the toddler asked. Meraude swallowed, and tried again.

"Sire, this is who Nigel tried to tell you about. Meet your cousin and namesake."

Kelson's stomach completely dropped out at that. "Rothana's child? She named him after me?"

His aunt nodded. "Forgive me, I asked her to come so I could see my grandson. She arrived when you were away, thinking it would be easier. She was supposed to leave before you returned, but you made much better time than we expected."

"Rothana is here?" He felt his entire body go numb.

"Yes, she is."

He didn't say anything, and Meraude was not going to break the silence. His gaze moved to

the toddler named after him, the boy who would be his own if not for that accident almost three years ago. His mother would never have given him the grief Mairona did. The child spoke, looking at Kelson with wide eyes.

"Who are you?" the boy asked, putting a finger in his mouth.

"He is the king," Meraude told him.

"And your cousin," he added. "My name is Kelson."

"My name!" the child exclaimed.

"Aye, that it is," the king replied sadly. Further conversation was interrupted when the stair door opened.

"*Maman*, I have returned. I hope little Kel behaved himself— Oh!"

Dear Lord, it was Rothana. Her brown eyes grew round as a dusky hand flew to her mouth when she saw Kelson. Meraude withdrew with little Kel to a far corner of the solar. "Good morrow, my lady," the king managed to say.

"Your Highness," she replied softly, dipping in a low curtsey. She was swathed in soft rose wool and silk, definitely not a nun's habit. Kelson offered his arm to help her up.

"Why are you not dressed according to your order's rule?" he asked, hoping she couldn't hear the pounding in his chest.

"Ah, my former order made it difficult to care for a small child, so I did not take vows. I have joined the Servants of St. Camber instead. When I am not representing the Servants, I am allowed to wear secular dress. The Servants have provided a better place for my son to be trained in his Deryni heritage." Her voice still carried the lilt that betrayed her eastern origins.

"The son you named after me," Kelson responded. "Why?"

She smiled sadly. "It would hardly be appropriate to name him after his father, my lord."

"There are still many other names to recommend themselves. Why not Nigel? He is the boy's grandfather," the king pointed out.

"I chose that for a second name: Kelson Nigel Camber Hakim. The last is my father's name." Her voice suddenly grew quiet. "When he was born, I wished you were his father. I still do, at times, and that is why I named him so. 'Twas a foolish dream." She had kept her eyes downcast, preferring formal court culturing to Mairona's daring confidence. "We will leave on the morn, your Highness. I would not cause grief to you or your queen."

"No," Kelson said quickly. "My lady, you have a right to be at Rhemuth, for marriage has made you a Haldane. You are not to blame for Conall's actions, and have not been shamed by them. My queen is confined to Meara, and has no right to take offense."

Rothana dared a surprised glance at his face. "Rumors are circulating through the court, Sire, but I did not take much stock in them."

Sighing, Kelson motioned her to a window bench. He settled across from her, keeping a safe distance between them. "I do not know what those rumors say. Mairona nearly committed high treason, plotting my assassination before we met. She could not carry it through, though, and as it turned out she saved my life twice." He looked away for a moment, staring out a window at a sky heavy with clouds. "I am not even sure how valid our marriage is, for Mairona was under

compulsion when we exchanged vows." Turning his head back, he noticed Rothana's hand trembled until she clenched it.

"What kind of compulsion, my lord?" she whispered.

"Her memories were altered so she would believe she was coming to Rhemuth for help in regaining Druimfada," he replied. "The compulsion was to bring me there and lead me into a trap."

"Did this compulsion involve your marriage, my lord?" Rothana asked. Kelson closed his eyes.

"No. That was definitely not part of her plan."

Taking a deep breath, Rothana folded her hands in her lap. "Then she wedded you willingly, my lord. Her vows were spoken true."

Letting out an explosive breath, Kelson rose and started pacing. "The law calls for execution in matters of high treason, but I will not do that. She did not carry the plan through, and confessed in time to prevent my death. When another sought to kill me with a dagger, she risked her life by taking the blade herself." He paused for a moment, then continued in a softer voice. "Also, she carries my child. Not my heir, for it is a daughter, but my child nonetheless."

Rothana turned her head away, glancing briefly at her own son playing happily with Meraude. "I would not presume to advise you in this matter, my lord," she said.

"But you do have thoughts on it," Kelson stated, taking his seat again. "It surprises me, but I find it easy to speak of this to you. Tell me your mind, Rothana."

She looked up at him, this time meeting his gaze. "You have two choices, my lord. Either forgive her and take her back, or denounce her and confirm your uncle as heir."

"I have seen the same options," he agreed. "Which do you recommend?"

"This is something you must decide for yourself, Sire. You will do as you must," she returned noncommittally. "The queen sounds like a lady of extraordinary courage, to stand in the way of an assassin's blade. You miss her?"

"I miss the lady I thought she was," Kelson confessed, looking away. "How did you know?"

"It is in your eyes," Rothana replied softly, lowering her gaze again. "There is a look there that was once meant for me, but I see it now belongs to her."

Coming to his feet, he shrugged with a casualness he didn't feel. "You still can read my heart, Rothana. I trust I will see you tonight at the feast?"

"Yes, Sire." She returned his smile shyly, rising with him.

Kelson took her hand to kiss it in courtly fashion, then left the solar to wind down the stairs to his hall. There was another choice she hadn't voiced, but must have been thinking. Since Mairona had intended treason when she married him, the marriage could be annulled. Then he would be free to marry again, and Kelson's brief meeting with Rothana led him to believe that time had perhaps made her willing again. She would never betray him.

The only problem, Kelson realized with disbelief, was that Rothana was not what he wanted. When he had kissed her hand, there was no spark, no sudden flicker of desire. He had shared an intimacy so easily with Mairona that was lacking in Rothana's formal court behavior, which generally kept everyone to their station. Mairona may be of lesser birth, but she was his peer in almost every

way. That was what he desired, now that he had tasted a full sharing of equals. His wife's words came back to him, from their conversation about Rothana late last winter. "*What if the Princess Rothana returned to Rhemuth?*"

His answer was a little different now, though the sentiment was still true. Rothana was never meant to be his queen, he saw that now. He needed Mairona, but he could never forgive her. Where would he ever possibly find her like? Pausing on the stair, Kelson laid his forehead against the outer wall as he grieved that duty would never let him find the easy happiness in marriage shared by Nigel and Meraude, or Morgan and Richenda. Older and wiser to the demands of his kingdom, he tried to let loose his precious dream that he could wed a woman who would effortlessly satisfy both his heart and the needs of his crown.

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The Haldane soldiers whispered about her behind her back. She knew it. Mairona struggled internally, both raging that they were careless enough to let her find out, and miserable that she had given them cause. *No one* had ever spoken rumors about her before she had become queen. It had been just her and her people, and if her Mearans gossiped about her, they were discreet enough that she never caught hint.

It had all come to a head this afternoon, when she had noticed Dhugal's guard captain speaking with one of his fellows, unconsciously glancing her way after every few sentences. She resolved not to let it goad her, and turned to her needlework on the cloth which would be used to swaddle her daughter when she was born. If she were born live. The two guards still spoke softly across the hall, and the more she told herself it didn't matter, the angrier she became.

Ailín watched this all in sadness, knowing exactly what was happening. "They should have better manners, especially in front of their queen," she muttered in disgust. Mairona looked up at her cheerlessly.

"My status as royal consort is questionable at best," she returned, placing her next stitch. Ailín set her jaw.

"Kelson may have ordered you to remain in Druimfada, but in five months he has not repudiated you." The duchess cut a thread with her teeth. "If he wanted to annul the marriage, it would probably have been done by now."

"Do you really think so?" Mairona asked despondently.

Ailín sighed, suddenly timid. "I cannot say for certis. The king's mind is not mine to know." She looked up again at the guards, finding determination again. "Regardless, you do not have to let them continue like that."

"I cannot stop them from speaking their mind in private," Mairona told her resignedly.

"That is not private!" Ailín declared bitterly. "If you do nothing, I will certainly give them a piece of my mind. It should come from you, though." She took Mairona's needlework from her hands, giving the queen little choice. Mairona sighed, then stood and squared her shoulders.

Her rounding belly ruled out a dignified walk, but she kept her head high when she approached the two guards. "My lady," the captain greeted nervously.

Mairona gave him no niceties. "What do you speak of, Jamie, that causes you to stare so rudely?"

"Your Highness— I— I—" the man stuttered. Mairona waved her hand.

"Do not bother me with apologies or excuses."

"News from Rhemuth," James replied shamefacedly.

"What news?" Mairona tapped her foot impatiently when the captain balked. "Come now, Jamie. I will hear it sooner or later, and later it may be from lips even more unkind than yours."

The man stared at the floor, brown hair falling in his eyes. "The king has returned to his seat, Madame."

"Surely that alone is no cause for sidelong glances to his wife." She clipped her words in annoyance.

"The Princess Rothana is in Rhemuth, your Highness."

Mairona felt a sudden chill, but did not let herself become outwardly flustered. "And?"

James nearly choked on his next words. "It is said the king spent his welcoming feast in her company, Madam, and not just in the hall."

That was too much. "Take your wicked rumors out of my castle!" she said viciously, then stormed away up to her room. After sharply ordering the cleaning servants out, she collapsed on her bed only to find she was too furious to cry. Instead, she shook uncontrollably, ripping a pillow apart with her bare hands. Feathers floated around her as the child within her fluttered, and Mairona felt her panic.

"So, your Deryni powers are strong, my daughter," she whispered, taking deep breaths and forcing herself to calm and reassure the fetus with love. Gradually, the child stilled.

There was a tentative knock at the door, which opened far enough for Ailín to poke her head in. She took one look at her queen, then entered and closed the door behind her. "Mairona, what happened?" she asked quietly, sitting next to her friend.

"Rothana is in Rhemuth," the queen replied too calmly. "Kelson just returned. That they are together is undeniable. Whether or not he has taken her to his bed—" She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I expect the annulment will arrive with due speed."

"You show no feeling about this?" Ailín wondered, disbelieving.

"I cannot. My daughter is now grown enough to feel my distress. I alarmed her before, when I destroyed that pillow." Mairona swallowed audibly. "Kelson once promised me if it came to a choice, he would take me. Now I have ruined everything."

Ailín took Mairona in a tight embrace, giving what comfort she could.