

## ✘ Chapter 41 ✘

It was good to be outside, riding amidst the mountains. Chances to leave Druimfada Town were rare, since they required Dhugal's presence, and his duties rarely allowed him to indulge her desires to tour her lands. Ailín must have spoken to him on her behalf after her scene with Jamie, though, because she had been invited to join her keepers on a journey to investigate Druimkyriel. Not that it was a real ride, for now that she was in the sixth month of her pregnancy there could be no reckless dashing through the countryside. Still, she had escaped Druimfada's stone walls, her once beloved home now her prison. She didn't even mind the chill permeating the November air, or the dusting flurries of snow marking the coming of winter in her mountains. For the day, she could pretend she was free as she and Ailín rode side by side.

Dhugal fell back to his duchess' side as they drew near Druimfada's southern reaches. "My lord Dhugal," Mairona called. "I have been meaning to talk to you. Your grandmother and Morgan's mother were sisters, were they not?"

"Aye," Dhugal confirmed. "My father an' Alaric are first cousins. Why?"

"It concerns the hidden library," she shrugged, referring to a recent discovery beneath Druimfada Castle. After the town's reconstruction was well advanced, she had sent trusted men to inspect the tunnel from the keep, where Kelson had nearly lost his life. As it turned out, Rolf had collapsed a portion, probably in hopes of trapping Kelson and his men if they gained entrance. It had to be repaired, and as the rubble was cleared and walls shored in preparation, an opening was found to a musty room, sealed off from the main tunnel generations ago. The room itself was partially collapsed, and most of its contents smashed beyond recognition, but last week the workmen had found one intact corner where they found treasure. An old, polished wooden chest has been hidden there, and when the dust and grime were cleaned they discovered the Seal of St. Camber worked in inlaid wood. Inside were countless scrolls, fragile with age, and Mairona had instantly claimed them for study, leaving Druimfada's administration to Dhugal's care.

"The library?" he prompted her, bringing her back from her thoughts.

"Aye, one of the scrolls contains lineages of selected noble houses for a few generations during the reigns of King Owain and King Uthyr, one hundred seventy years ago. Tell me, do you know if the House of Corwyn is descended from Arion Corwyn's first or second wife?"

"The second, an I remember true," Dhugal responded. "It doesnae matter, since nae one kens who either wife was."

"The scroll has her name." Mairona gave him a half smile. "The second wife was Elyse Thuryn."

"Thuryn?" Dhugal repeated, raising a copper eyebrow in question.

"Aye, as in the Rhys Thuryn that married St. Camber's daughter Evaine. Elyse was their granddaughter. You bear his blood, as does your father Duncan, and Morgan, through their mothers who were daughters of the House of Corwyn."

"I'll be damned!" Dhugal exclaimed, gaping. Ailín twisted her face in disapproval and lashed his leg with her riding crop.

"Watch your tongue!" she ordered sternly.

"Mercy, lass!" Dhugal laughed. "It isnae every day ye learn ye're descended from holy saints!"

"The holiness thinned to nonexistence before it reached you," she muttered, but she grinned back.

"Aye, weel." Dhugal scratched his ear. "It rubs off right fast on the borders!"

There was more in the scroll, Mairona reflected, but it was really for Kelson's ears if he would ever listen. It would be her one last offering before their marriage was annulled, and perhaps in its giving she would find peace.

Her reflection ceased as she caught hints of gray forms through the trees. "I think we have arrived," she told her companions.

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The small church was in an advanced state of ruin, with only two and a half walls standing at any height. The window arches were almost all missing, and grass grew through the nave up to the altar dais, all dusted with snow. Amazingly, the altar seemed intact, if shorter than usual. Dhugal, Ailín, and Mairona split apart, each searching the structure on their own as it took their fancy.

"Can you feel the stillness here?" Mairona called to the other two as she looked up to the open sky.

"Aye," Dhugal returned. "As if the world is hushed."

Some worn carving remained in a back corner, and it was the first thing that drew Dhugal's attention. One pilaster was relatively undamaged, and he ran his fingers over the twisting stone foliage. "K," he mumbled, finding the letter worked amid interlocking vines. "L," he continued, around and lower. "Another L... R... Y... Kyriell! The letters of Kyriell are carved here!"

"Of course. This is St. Kyriell's at Druimkyriell," Mairona chided him. "Watch for the ghost. Stories of the haunted ruins of St. Kyriell have terrified Druimfada's children for generations."

"Ghost?" Ailín went pale, stumbling.

"Merely a winter night's tale," Mairona shrugged, running her hand along the base of a window. "I wonder how it started?"

Mairona was ignored as Ailín examined the uneven ground that almost tripped her. "There is a hole here!" she called. That attracted both Dhugal and Mairona's attention, and they soon gathered round to examine the gaping blackness large enough to swallow a foot.

"Ye're lucky ye didnae break your ankle," Dhugal observed as he lay on his stomach and pressed his head to the opening. After a few moments he pulled back, conjured a sphere of green handfire, and waved it down the hole before wedging his face in the opening again. "'Tis hard tae see anything," he called. "I think there's a stone floor."

Ailín was intrigued, absorbed by her husband's continued observations, but Mairona's attention was captured by the altar. Its upper part was formed of four alternating squares of white and black stone, resting on four more alternating rectangles of white and black. Judging from the size of the lower part, and its interrupted height, it almost seemed as if the altar had sunk over a foot into the earth. "Like ward cubes," she whispered, walking slowly to the great squared slab. She stood by its side, bowing her head to send a brief prayer to Christ and St. Camber, then spread the palms of her hands on its top.

It hummed.

"Sweet Brigid!" she exclaimed, jerking her hands away.

"Wha'?" Dhugal called, pushing himself to his knees as the handfire was quenched.

"The altar is alive," Mairona gasped. "Touch it, you will see."

Dhugal and Ailín both approached, standing to her right as Mairona replaced her hands, bowing her head. They followed suit, but Ailín jerked her hands away as if they were bitten. Dhugal did not fear, though, and now that Mairona knew what to expect she welcomed its voice.

*Dominus vobiscum*, whispered at the edge of their senses, so faint it could almost be imagined.

*Et cum spiritu tuo*. Multiple whispers echoed the reply, then faded beyond awareness. Mairona strained to hear, but her senses could only detect the thrumming of the stone beneath her fingers. Sighing, she withdrew her hands and rubbed them together.

"What kind of power could create that?" she wondered.

"I dinnae know, but Kelson an' my father should see this," Dhugal replied, shaking his own fingers. "Ailín?" She didn't answer, but stared dumbly and frightfully at the altar. "Ailín, there isnae reason tae fear. Whoever created this church was a servant o' Christ, an' means nae harm." He took her in his arms, where she shuddered and leaned her head against his shoulder.

"Aye," she gulped, gasping for air. "'Tis only I have feared what we are my whole life."

"I know," Dhugal murmured soothingly. "Hush now."

Rising awkwardly, Mairona turned from the scene and walked down the church's nave. Dhugal's tender comfort for his young wife had reawakened the deep ache in her soul, and she would not let them see her tears.

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*Lady Mairona Brigid ní Dhugain de Haldane, Queen Consort, unto Prince Kelson Cinhil Rhys Anthony Haldane, by the Grace of God King of Gwynedd, Prince of Meara, and Lord of the Purple March.*

*Your Highness: I pray that this missive finds you well and in good health.*

*The Duke and Duchess of Cassan accompanied me to the ruins of Druimkyriell yesterday, and I am certain that his Grace will impart our experience better than I may convey in words. His Grace will no doubt also convey the discovery that the House of Corwyn bears the blood of his Holiness Camber MacRorie, which makes his Grace, the Bishop McLain, and the Duke of Corwyn descendents of that venerable saint. I am sending the scroll that bears the relationship between MacRorie and Corwyn through the house of Thuryn, and pray you have a copy returned to me so I may continue my studies, for there is another discovery that I wish to explore further. I now offer that discovery to you.*

Mairona paused, chewing on the feathered end of her quill as she thought how best to continue. This was a task she had refused to give to a scribe, for what she had to say was for Kelson's eyes alone. Slowly, meticulously, she chose her wording to illustrate her discovery and the answers she had found in prayer. She would not cry, for this was supposed to give her peace, but that peace was more fleeting than she had every dreamed when her heart yearned for a different outcome. Sighing morosely, Mairona replaced the quill in its stand and sprinkled sand over the parchment to dry the ink, then dumped the used sand on the floor before neatly folding the letter. Satisfied, she took a scarlet wax stick in one hand and a candle in the other, bringing them together to drip into a molten red pool to secure the folds. Once it had grown large enough she replaced the

candle and tugged her father's ring off her thumb. Her seal, the invincible north tower that had been the first fortified construction at Druimfada. Pressing it into the wax, she sighed and rested her head on her arms. The babe within her roused and kicked.

*I know, little one, she sent to her daughter. I grow restless, too. Yesterday's freedom was all too intoxicating, but today I am back to my lonely prison.*

There was a stirring at the entrance to her chamber, and Mairona shot up. "My lady?" Ailín called, easing the door open.

"Come," Mairona answered, replacing the ring on her hand as she blew on the wax to harden it. "Would you ask Dhugal to deliver this to the king on his next visit to Rhemuth?" she asked, offering her letter and the promised scroll of lineages.

"Aye," Ailín replied, taking the items. "Repairs to the tunnel are now complete, and he asks you to join him for inspection."

"Give Dhugal my regrets," Mairona said, sitting once again to rest her hands on the table and her chin on the hands. "My presence would only be a courtesy."

"As you wish." Ailín nodded in leave taking, then went to rejoin her husband. That left Mairona alone again with her melancholy.

Kelson had not taken her back, and after more than five months it was doubtful he ever would. He needed male heirs to succeed him, and if her treason would not allow her to provide them, he would have to find another queen. That meant annulment, declaring that her marriage was invalid and therefore had never taken place, and her daughter would technically be branded illegitimate. Rothana was still in Rhemuth, and if gossip were true, she was increasingly in the presence of Kelson's inner circle. She would be the next Queen of Gwynedd.

*"Oh, God," Mairona choked on a sudden sob. I do not deserve him for what I have done, but I yearn for my husband nonetheless. I know I should be happy that he will find contentment in a former love, but I would rather scratch her eyes out! Lord Christ, will I ever find peace? Why do I have to love him so?*