

✘ Chapter 42 ✘

Ailín sought out Dhugal as soon as he had returned from his tour of the tunnel work, and found him in the hall, tending to Druimfada's business. Mairona had been doing less and less as the months wore on, and Ailín wished she knew whether it was her advancing pregnancy or a loss of interest. "My lord husband!" Ailín called, rushing to his side. He grinned and kissed her hand, then sobered when he saw the expression on her face.

"What is it?" he asked seriously.

"I must speak to you in private," she told him. "Will you join me in our quarters?"

Turning to the castellan, Dhugal smiled an apology and excused himself before leading his wife up to the room they shared in the north tower, just below Mairona's.

"Now, lass, tell me," he prompted as they sat together on the bed.

"Mairona asked that you give this to the king." She handed over the neatly folded packet and lineage scroll to her husband's keeping. "I think he should read it."

Dhugal studied the Seal, brushing it with his fingers to look for a message encoded by Deryni means, but discovered none. "What does it say?"

"The scroll traces the lineages of St. Camber to the House of Corwyn. As for the missive, I do not know," Ailín shrugged, "and it does not matter, but she needs the comfort of knowing the king has seen what she wishes to say. You must make certain that he reads it."

Staring at the opposite wall, Dhugal lost himself in his thoughts. Ailín watched silently, unwilling to interrupt or distract. "Why do ye help her?" he asked finally.

"Because—because if she had not presented me, you would never have danced with me, and I would be married to Drostan, that lout of a man!" He looked at her then, patiently facing her eyes, which were wide with adolescent anxiety. How very young she was at times, but then she was only fifteen years old. Not that Dhugal's eighteen years carried much seniority in numbers, but he had ruled the earldom of Transha since he was fifteen, when his late grandfather grew too ill to carry out his duties. That had aged him nearly as quickly as the crown aged Kelson. In time, as Duchess of Cassan and with exposure to the king's inner circle, he prayed Ailín would grow, too.

"We would hae danced. Mairona presented ye because I had already picked ye oot. I wouldnae hae let ye gae sae easy, my lass," he murmured, kissing the tip of her nose. "We'll gae tae Rhemuth, Kelson will read the letter, an' ye'll gi'e it tae him."

"Me?" Ailín squeaked. "No, you are his blood brother! He will listen to you! I am merely—"

"Scairt," Dhugal finished for her, grinning. "I swear, I willnae let him bite ye. Come, lass." He pulled her off the bed, but she resisted his gentle tug.

"Me? Through the transfer portal? I cannot!" She whipped her hand out of his, but he was not to be put off so easily.

"Easy, lass," he told her, scooping an arm around her shoulders and firmly drawing her to the marked square on the floor. Her eyebrows jumped to her scalp when she stepped on it and felt it thrum.

"Dhugal!" she cried, struggling to escape.

"Hush now," he murmured, drawing her back against his chest so he could trap her in his arms. "This is like tae when ye helped Mairona scry the Torenthi. Ye didnae fear that?"

"I did," she confessed in a small voice, "but I could not show my fear to the queen, and I had to help you."

"Then help me now. Trust me, lass, an' open tae me." Extending his mind to hers, he circled round her shields while she breathed as he taught her, trying to calm and center. Her fingers clawed at his, so he closed his arms so tightly she could barely breathe, but she stilled at his unspoken promise to keep her safe and close. "Let me in," he whispered, and she haltingly lowered her outer shields for him. He surged in before she could change her mind, and suffused her with comfort and affection. Her manner relaxed, and she leaned her head back on his shoulder as she dropped her remaining shields with more confidence. Dhugal surrounded her consciousness and took the control he needed.

Dear God, she was ill, and hadn't told him.

She had not come far enough along in her training to recognize that he had discovered her, so he was able to shutter his reaction away from her consciousness. He had thought she looked haggard, and just assumed that he had not been allowing her to sleep as much as she was accustomed at night. New realization dawned that she was having trouble eating, and when she excused herself to the garderobe more often than not it was to lose what little she could swallow. This had been going on for nearly two months, so it was more dangerous than a passing illness. Why didn't she tell him?

The answer was easy to read. She thought he would fear catching it, and in that fear would put her away. Ailín dreaded that more than anything, and memories surged through his consciousness of being locked in the dark when her father was greatly displeased. A cold chill swept through the shuttered part of his mind as she saw how terrified she had been of the dark, and in her panic had bloodied her hands trying to beat the door down and gain escape. That chill was warmed by realization of the extraordinary courage it must have taken her to face down her father after their night in Kelson's gardens. What would Geoffrey have done if Dhugal hadn't married her, or even come to the townhouse that night? It was unthinkable. He remembered the bruise on her cheek that night, which had raised his suspicions then. Now there was no doubt how it had come about.

Dhugal? she asked tentatively, wondering at his hesitation. He locked away his new knowledge for later sifting and turned back to their current purpose.

This may feel odd, he warned her as he reached out to enfold the portal's energy pattern. His memory recalled the pattern of the portal in Rhemuth's library, and when he balanced the energy between the two the world whirled around them as the ground fell away and they were enveloped in the darkness of void. Ailín screamed, but no sound came out, for she couldn't breathe.

The void lasted for two eternal heartbeats until there was solid stone beneath their feet, and Ailín gasped for air, her eyes screwed shut. "Tis over," Dhugal whispered. "Ye did fine."

She didn't feel fine, and she couldn't seem to fill her lungs. Maybe if she opened her eyes? They *were* in the library at Rhemuth, surrounded by shelving and countless literary works, and her knees gave way. "Whoa, easy, lass!" Dhugal exclaimed as he held her off the floor. "Take a deep breath, an' we'll walk over there to sit until you feel better, hmm?"

Ailín nodded, never noticing that Dhugal's speech was already transitioning to the court dialect. She would not be sick now, not in front of Dhugal. Her entire concentration focused on crossing the few steps with Dhugal's assistance to a bench, where she collapsed. Dhugal sat beside her and pressed her head to his chest, holding her trembling body close. "Hush, now, you are only

frightened."

* * * * *

In the King's Tower, Kelson was hosting a family gathering the night following his birthday. After all the feasting, the jugglers, the players, and state formality of the previous day it was a welcome release. His Aunt Meraude and Uncle Nigel sat with him by the fire, and Rothana attended as well, as a cousin by marriage, but she spoke little. The Queen Mother Jehana had joined them briefly, but retired early to her newly reclaimed Queens Chambers. Kelson's cousins Rory and Payne had retreated to a corner with Liam. The boy-king and Payne had long been close, but since Liam's return from war and the resulting stories of stealing five thousand men from under Mahael, Payne had started looking on his best friend with hero worship. These days, separating the two was like trying to wrest a sword from the hands of one of Kelson's guard. The three boys had their heads bowed over a grouping of carved foot soldiers, knights, lancers, and archers, and seemed to be discussing military strategy. In another grouping, Little Kel toddled after Kelson's youngest cousin, the four-year-old Eirian, and the pair generally made themselves an entertaining nuisance to all. Presently, Kel was trying to rearrange the boys' carefully arrayed battle plan, to their great dismay.

"No, Kel!" Rothana called. "Come here!"

"Pway too!" the toddler insisted, jutting his lower lip before he stuck his fist in his mouth.

"Pway?" Kelson asked Rothana.

"He wants to play with the boys," Rothana sighed. "Kel, come here now."

"I wanna pway!" he insisted, starting to cry. Rory and Payne looked at each other, disgusted, but Liam shook his head and picked up a lancer and foot soldier.

"Here, Kel," he offered the little boy. "Go play by your mother." Little Kel ecstatically took each prize in a chubby fist and ran to Rothana.

"Look, Mama!" As he presented his new toys for her appraisal, Eirian decided she had been left out and marched up to her older brothers.

"Me too!" she told them.

"No, Eirian," Rory admonished her. "Soldiers are not for girls."

"Me too!" she insisted, imitating Kel's pout.

"No, Eirian!" Rory repeated.

"Play wif me?" she begged.

"Not now, go away," Payne told her. She balled her little fists and gave them all her meanest frown, but they ignored her. Suddenly she was spinning through the air, and she squealed in delight as the floor rushed away and the room tumbled until her stomach was folded over someone's shoulder. Squirming, she twisted until she could look up at her new playmate.

"Kelson play wif me!" she giggled.

"Aye," he grinned back, bouncing her off his shoulder and under one arm. Something tugged at his knee, and he looked down.

"Me too," Kel called holding up an arm as his stubby little fingers opened and closed in pleading request.

"What? You as well?" Securing Eirian firmly, Kelson pounced on the boy until he was tucked under the other arm, and spun them around until he was thoroughly dizzy. Both toddlers shrieked with glee. "Alright," he said, shaking his head to clear the reeling. "Down you go." The children hit the ground running, chasing each other around the room as Kelson clumsily resumed his seat, vision still whirling. Meraude was becoming accustomed to her nephew's new interest in Eirian, but Rothana clearly showed her surprise.

"My lord, you are kind to the children," she stated. Kelson took up his discarded goblet of wine.

"God willing, I will have my own daughter soon," he shrugged, sipping at the Fianna red. Rothana rose and walked to a recessed window oriel out of earshot, looking back in silent, unpresumptuous request for Kelson to follow. Dropping his wine again, he joined her.

"And her mother?" Rothana asked quietly, eyes demurely downcast. Kelson shook his head.

"I cannot forgive," he replied.

"You forgave me," she reminded him gently. Placing a hand on her shoulder, Kelson smiled.

"You wed Conall in ignorance, in an attempt to keep my dreams for Gwynedd alive when you believed me gone."

"I did," she concurred, "as your queen wed you in ignorance of the compulsion placed on her or the plots set in place, and risked her life twice over to keep you and your dreams alive."

"She planned to kill me!" Kelson protested in irritation, retracting his hand.

"And when her ignorance was lifted, she overcame compulsion and risked execution to stop that plan. You are stubborn because you still hold anger for her hurt. You must forgive her, my lord, for the sake of your soul," Rothana insisted.

"You, of all people, argue that I should take her back?"

"You will do what you must for the sake of Gwynedd, my lord. I am merely acting as a servant of God by reminding you that Christ teaches us to forgive all."

"Your Highness?" Dolfin interrupted, bowing. Sighing explosively in frustration, Kelson turned from the bride-that-almost-was and left the oriel's enclosure.

"What is it?"

"His Grace the Duke of Cassan has arrived and wishes to speak with you," the lad stated.

"I will receive him in my bedchamber," Kelson commanded. The squire bowed and spun precisely on his heel to depart.

* * * * *

"Their Graces the Duke and Duchess of Cassan," Dolfin announced, then stood back from the door into the king's bedchamber.

Kelson smiled warmly as his closest friend was announced. "Brother, I am glad to see you. How go things in Druimfada?"

Dhugal grinned and entered without replying, letting his wife in. "Ailín!" Kelson exclaimed

with a grin. "This is a pleasant surprise!" She curtsied, then tilted her head up when Kelson made to kiss her cheek. He offered her the chair opposite his own, at the foot of the great state bed and before the lively fireplace. Dhugal hooked a stool to draw near, dropping a leather tube on the floor. Both new arrivals took refreshments from Ivo.

"We have been to the church at Druimkyriel," Dhugal announced. "It begs further exploration."

"What did you find?" the king asked, leaning forward in interest.

"There is a hidden chamber beneath a carving of the letters K, Y, R, and L, for starters."

"Kyriell," Kelson murmured.

"Aye," Dhugal confirmed. "Mairona said the church was St. Kyriell's. I intend to have the chamber opened, but there is more. Mairona touched the altar, and said it was alive. When I placed my own hands on it, I heard whisperings of a Mass celebration, but no service has been held there for over a hundred years."

"Indeed? Is there more?"

"Not of the church," Dhugal replied. "It will take some excavation to gain safe access to the underground chamber, and the altar will take Deryni trained better than I to explore."

"Mairona did not wish to try?" Kelson asked, taking a deep draught of wine to mask his features.

"She is greatly changed, Kel." Shifting on his stool, Dhugal stretched his legs out. "The only interest she has these days is her Camber scrolls."

A flicker of concern flashed across Kelson's face, but it soon disappeared in hard-set eyes. "I find that impossible to believe."

"You have not seen her in nearly five months. Her studies have born fruit, though." Reaching to the floor, Dhugal retrieved his leather tube and fished out the aged, rolled parchment Mairona had sent. Handling it carefully, he passed it off to his blood-brother. "This is one of the items found in the sealed chamber beneath Druimfada. It was compiled by one of the Servants of St. Camber over one hundred years ago, and traces some of the MacRorie descendants."

"Really?" Kelson breathed, gingerly unrolling the first few lines.

"Aye, a real find. Camber MacRorie's daughter Evaine married Rhys Malachy Lord Thuryn, and their son Tieg married a lady named Karis d'Oriel. They had a daughter Elyse Thuryn, who was wed to Albion Corwyn."

"Corwyn?" Kelson nearly jumped out of his chair. "Then Morgan, and Duncan, and—you!"

"Aye!" Dhugal grinned, pleased with himself. "I'm especially holy—a bishop's son and an heir of St. Camber!"

Kelson was clearly speechless, his jaw working up and down as he looked at Dhugal, then at the fire, and back at Dhugal. Slowly, he leaned back into his chair and rested his chin on a hand, a slow smile spreading on his face. "Well."

"Well?" Dhugal snorted to Ailín. "All he can say is 'well?'"

"Well, I have to find another partner for arms practice!" Kelson grinned, then attempted a

bad imitation of Dhugal's border speech. "I cannae knock ye about yer holy heid now, can I?"

"Well!" Dhugal grinned back, running his hand over an old scar behind his ear where the king had done just that.

Chuckling, Kelson tossed off the rest of his wine. "My family is gathered in the next room. Will you join us?"

"Not yet, Kel. There is something else," Dhugal responded, holding one hand up to keep the king in place as the other reached in the leather tube again and pulled out Mairona's sealed packet, which he offered to his wife. "Here, Ailín. This is your task."

She swallowed visibly, but took the missive, unwilling to refuse in front of the king. Her eyes locked on Dhugal, who smiled with an encouraging nod. Sighing, she rose from her chair and approached her king, offering the letter. "The queen bade me see that your Highness receive this," she gulped. Kelson took it cautiously, as if its very touch would sear his fingers. As soon as she was free of her burden, Ailín fled back to her chair, and Kelson noted her discomfiture, debating whether he or the missive was the cause. If Dhugal were so casual about the letter, it must be he.

"Ailín," he said kindly, dropping the packet in his lap as he put it out of his mind. "You have been away from court much, and we have not come to know each other well. I have long considered Dhugal to be my brother, which now makes you my sister." Ailín dared to look up at him, her mouth rounding in an "o" as he continued. "Since my brother calls me Kelson in private, it seems that my sister ought to, as well."

Her entire bearing changed, and her blue eyes glowed as she looked at her husband, then back at him. "Thank you, Kelson," she said shyly, as if trying out a word for the first time.

"Ailín," Dhugal called. "Go on into the next room. I will join you later."

"Aye," she replied, rising and preparing to curtsy to the king, but he shook his head.

"That is not necessary here," Kelson said. "You will want the door to the right of the fireplace."

"Aye." She looked at him, then her husband, and turned to leave as instructed. When she was gone, Kelson smiled ruefully, thinking back to an equally frightened girl on the heights of Rhemuth's walls.

"I seem to have a habit of terrifying young girls out of their wits," he commented.

"Ailín is child-like when she is uncertain." Shaking his head, Dhugal returned to the king. "Tis your crown, not you," Dhugal returned.

"I used to think that, but there is no separation," Kelson mused. "I am the Crown, and the Crown dictates who I am. Enough nonsense. What is this about?" He raised the folded parchment and cocked an eyebrow.

"Neither Ailín nor I know what it contains," Dhugal told him. "I was only asked to be certain that you read it, and I thought you would prefer if Ailín were not here. If you would like me to leave as well, I will, provided you promise to read."

"Why should I? You do not know what this contains."

Grimacing, Dhugal took his first taste of the wine Ivo had poured. Oh, how he missed the Fianna vintage! "Ailín tells me that Mairona cries herself to sleep more often than not, repenting of her sins but finding no solace. She still loves you, Kel. You know something of what it is to live

suffering from a shattered heart. Traitor or no, as a Christian she deserves peace in her penitence. If you reading that letter will give comfort, then you will do so. Shall I go?"

Snorting, Kelson waved a negative. "If you are brash enough to order your king about, you may remain. Let us see what my errant wife has to say." Kelson shattered the wax seal and unfolded the letter, tilting toward the firelight to scan through the beginning, and he grunted. "It merely reiterates what you have already told me about Druimkyriel and the linkage between St. Camber and the House of Corwyn. Wait—"

It appears that another great-granddaughter of St. Camber married into the House of Dugain as well, which explains the presence of Druimkyriel in Druimfada, and the Camber scrolls hidden beneath the castle. As I reflected and prayed on this knowledge, it gave me insight on my troubles.

"The Dugains, too?" Kelson breathed, leaning forward to catch the light better. What on earth could this mean?

I have wondered how God and St. Camber could have blessed our marriage, knowing what I did not at the time, namely, the treachery I planned to carry out. The answer is in your daughter. I expect that I shall hear of the annulment of our union soon, leaving you free to marry again and beget the male heirs you need to carry on your royal line. News in Meara tells me that the Princess Rothana has returned to Rhemuth, and knowing the feelings you once bore for her, and possibly still do, I hope she will be your queen after all.

Khadasa, she expected to be repudiated, and offered her blessing to Rothana as her successor. Did she think he would risk his soul to annul a marriage sanctified by the Church, St. Camber, and God himself? She knew he would always act in Gwynedd's benefit, but did she not realize that God must come before even duty?

The gift I can give in reparation for my terrible wrongs is a princess of your own blood who also bears the blood of St. Camber. I beg you to treasure her, and not hold her accountable for my failings. With loving and firm guidance, I am certain that she may grow without my defects of character. May Camber protect you, and God grant you long life.

He had spent his entire reign working to restore St. Camber to prominence, searching for any bit or piece of his life and work that was to be found. Never had he dreamed to uncover the saint's bloodline, living representation in his closest friends, and now in his unborn daughter and traitorous wife.

"Dear God!" Kelson cried, letting the missive float to the floor as he buried his face in his hands.

"What is wrong?" Dhugal asked, falling to his knees at Kelson's side in his concern.

"The Dugains," Kelson dictated. "Mairona also bears the blood of St. Camber, and so will my daughter."

"Are you certain she speaks true?"

"There is little reason not to, since she believes I will renounce her and make Rothana queen. A marriage can only be annulled if it is invalid, and unfortunately, it was plainly obvious when we were wed that ours is not. I have to take her back. Our union was intended by God, or it would not have been so divinely blessed. I cannot forgive her, but I have to take her back and learn to tolerate her." The final shattered remnants of dreams that sang of a heart's joy in marriage slipped away with his tears, taking the tattered remains of his heart with it.

"Kelson." Rising, Dhugal placed a hand on his blood brother's shoulder. "Return to Druimfada with me, and see Druimkyriel."

"Aye." He pulled his hands away from his face, and Dhugal could see the tears that still fell. "Your father should come as well, and Archbishop Cardiel. Rothana, too, as a representative of the Servants of St. Camber."

"Is that wise?" Dhugal asked.

"Wise or not, we may need her help with the altar. Morgan and Richenda are home in Coroth, and Rothana's eastern training may give her knowledge we need. I am certain my aunt will care for her son until we return. Go now, join the gathering. I wish to be alone."

"Aye, Brother." Dhugal squeezed Kelson's shoulder. When he opened the door, the sounds of laughter and happiness floated through the opening, only to be snatched by silence as the heavy oak thudded back into place and the latch caught.

Springing from his seat, Kelson stalked to his private chapel and sank on the prie-dieu before the altar, tilting his head up to a fresco of St. Camber crowning his ancestor, King Cinhil, thereby restoring the Haldanes to the throne of Gwynedd.

Why did You send her to me, Lord? How could You give me a wife and queen that intended to destroy me? I cannot forgive her; it is too dangerous for Gwynedd. How can that be Your will? Please, Lord, give me the strength to do what I must and endure. Domine Christe, dona me pacem.