

✠ Chapter 43 ✠

"Saraid, fetch me a blanket."

"Aye, my lady."

Mairona was studying another of the Camber scrolls in her hall, since afternoon light was weak in her bedchamber during the winter. The high windows in the hall were barely adequate for her purposes, and since they were unglazed, they let in the mid-November mountain wind with the sun. Her hands were becoming chilled, which normally wouldn't bother her, but there was the babe to think of. That infant kicked, a small, fluttering pressure in Mairona's womb.

"Easy, now," Mairona whispered, rubbing one hand on her rounded belly. "Do you intend to beat me all morning?" The answer came with another gentle jab. Mairona chuckled, for her tiny, unborn daughter was now her only source of happiness. Still smiling, she returned to her reading on the Servants of St. Camber at Druimkyriel. Whoever had written it had taken great pains to be enigmatic. "Look to the heavens for the Holy Shiral," she recited. "What does that mean?"

"My lady Mairona!" Saraid cried, running in panic down the wide wooden stair that led to the north tower. "My lady!"

"What is it?" Mairona asked, letting the scroll curl up in her hand as she stood and moved away from the window. Just as Saraid reached the floor of the hall, Mairona's attention was ripped back to the top of the stair by a flash of crimson. She stood paralyzed as the king descended the stair quickly, scarlet and gold mantle billowing behind, followed by Dhugal and Ailín, then Bishop Duncan McLain, Archbishop Cardiel—

"Sweet Brigid, the annulment has come," she whispered, fighting tears, but one escaped. She could not move to wipe it away. All movement and chatter in the room faded as, one by one, Mairona's people watched the King of Gwynedd swoop into Druimfada's hall. There was little chance his presence bore good tidings.

The final member of the party was a monk in a gray robe—no, wait, it was a woman in a monk-like robe, with a long black braid, dusky skin, and eastern features. It had to be—no. He couldn't. He wouldn't, but obviously he had. It must be the Princess Rothana.

As Kelson led his party across the hall in her direction, her fingers loosened on the Camber scroll, and its wooden spindle clattered to the floor. "My lady," he greeted neutrally, his face blank. His raven hair was pulled back in its usual border braid, falling down his back to the bottom of his shoulder blades. The great ruby known as the Eye of Rom flashed portentously in his ear and his head was circled by a simple, but kingly coronet. He was dressed head-to-toe in crimson, darker than his usual shade, embellished here and there with embroidered golden wire. Even his leather boots were died to match, and something about the hue reminded Mairona of blood. Kelson had obviously taken great pains to demonstrate that his presence here was solely as King of Gwynedd, and duty alone would reign.

Mairona had not consciously known that she still held on to a small thread of hope for her husband until that thread was unraveled by his official, royal façade, devoid of emotion. She felt like she couldn't breathe. "Your Highness." It was hardly more than a mumble, and she did not curtsy, for she knew she would fall if she tried. Instead, she bowed her head deeply, willing her arms to move and hold her rounded stomach. "Welcome to Druimfada."

Her motion drew his eyes to her belly, and he took in how it had grown with his child. Dark circles underlined her eyes, and she seemed so fragile that the lightest touch would shatter her. A warring mixture of elation over the child and anguish over the mother struggled for hold of his

features, but the struggle never pierced his dispassionate mask. "We have come to see the church at Druimkyriel."

"Oh." Her head rose as her eyes glanced over the crowd of guests, resting last and longest on her rival Rothana. "The castle only has three private chambers."

What nonsense was she blithering about? Dhugal was right; she had changed. "We will share a chamber with the Duke of Cassan, and his duchess will bed with you," Kelson declared.

"My brother Duncan and I may lodge with your priest in the town," Cardiel added.

Mairona swallowed, eyeing Rothana purposefully. "Then the third will go to—?"

Kelson gestured toward the eastern princess, his former intended bride. "This is the Princess R'thana Ayesha Kamila bint Hakim ar-Rafiq, Nabila of Nur Hallaj."

Smiling warmly, Rothana bent in a bow rather than the expected lady's curtsy. "May Christ and Camber be with you. I represent the Servants of St. Camber."

"Oh," Mairona uttered stupidly.

"My lady?" Saraid asked, nudging her mistress.

"Hmm? Aye." At her attendant's prompting, Mairona recovered somewhat. "Forgive me, your Highness, my lords and lady, your presence was unexpected. Please excuse me to see to your lodging." With a brief nod, she rushed past her visitors and escaped up the wooden stair, beyond the view of "guests" and the stares of her own people.

Dear Lord, he had brought *her*. She wanted Kelson to be happy, but she wanted that happiness to be with her, which she also knew she didn't deserve. Now the discarded Queen in exile had to greet and play host to her successor, the lady who would share her husband's heart, bear the royal heirs that Mairona wanted so much to give. How could he bring *her* here and parade her in front of his *wife*? But then, if the archbishop were here, the annulment was good and stated that she had never truly been Kelson's wife, was no more Queen of Gwynedd and Meara. Druimkyriel was only a pretense, a public reasoning for the unknown men in her hall. *Why, Lord? I am not deserving, but how much more do I have to suffer? Help me understand how this fits into Your will.* How could he bring *her*? How could she possibly endure his nearness, or *hers*?

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That night, Kelson could not sleep.

He and Dhugal shared the chamber Mairona had hastily vacated for them at the top of the north tower, and the howling mountain wind had roused him in the middle of the night. Every time he thought he was drifting back to unconsciousness, he caught a hint of Mairona's favorite rose scent, which lingered in the room. He was cold, too, since Dhugal had somehow managed to roll himself up in all the coverlets and furs, leaving Kelson exposed to chill in the winter air. Poor Ailín. How did she cope? At least he had the good sense not to try to sleep in the nude, as was generally the custom. It was too damn cold in the mountains for that. If it weren't for the heavy woolen gown he wore, it was likely that some treasured parts would have frozen off by now.

Snorting in frustration, he parted the heavy curtains and swung himself out of the bed, nearly cursing when his feet slipped through the sparse rushes and hit icy stone instead of the expected thick warmth of Kheldish carpet. *Fool, this is not Rhemuth.* Summoning a crimson globe of handfire, Kelson rooted around for the slippers he had discarded before crawling into bed. One was in plain sight, but it took some hunting to realize that the other had been kicked under the bed. When they safely protected his feet from freezing, he grabbed the heavy, fur-lined bedrobe he

discarded on top of his trunk earlier in the evening and gratefully shrugged it on. Sufficiently insulated from the cold, Kelson waved the handfire before him to light his way and quietly slipped out to the stair.

If he couldn't sleep, perhaps prayer in the chapel would still his soul. It was hard to acknowledge that it was more than icy air and howling winds keeping him from a sound slumber. Mairona's appearance had rattled him more than he cared to admit. She looked so—not weak, but delicate, brittle, almost unwell. Her face did not portray the healthy glow he had seen in his Aunt Meraude or Richenda when they were breeding.

And then Rothana! She had cornered him in the chapel nearly as soon as they were all settled with their sleeping arrangements, reminding him unrelentingly that it was his Christian duty to forgive as man and husband, whether or not the king could reconcile with a traitor.

"You must have seen her pain on our arrival," the princess argued. "Perhaps it takes a woman to read another woman's heart, but upon our meeting I saw a lady in grief and despair. She has obviously repented of her sins, and so deserves forgiveness."

Kelson had turned away from the chapel's alter and the prie-dieu, and stood mere inches from her, looming his full height and calling on every trick of intimidation he had, but Rothana knew him far too well to be affected by his posture when she was certain of her righteousness.

"I came to take her back, what more do you want from me?" Kelson protested. "She saved my life, which has won her reprieve from execution, and our marriage cannot legally be annulled, so I have to take her back. However, she committed treason and attempted regicide. It is too dangerous for me to forgive her. How can you say such things?" Something swept into the doorway, behind Rothana's back, but Kelson couldn't stop his next words before realizing that it was Mairona. "After everything we once had together, Rothana!"

Pride did now allow him to move away from his eastern princess, and stubbornness prevented him from notifying Rothana of Mairona's entrance as the princess tentatively touched him. "I admit this is very difficult for me, but I will do as duty requires. You know as well as I what I still feel for you."

A swallowed gasp sounded from the door, and Rothana whirled to look face to face with Kelson's exiled queen. Mairona leaned heavily on the doorframe, her hand pressed to her mouth as her eyes stared wildly. The princess reached out to her, taking a step as her vocation bade her comfort a soul in need, but Mairona fled in desperate anguish.

"You must have seen her!" Rothana accused Kelson, turning back to him in fury. He had only seen her anger once, when he first met her at her former abbey of St. Brigid's, after it had been ravaged by Ithel of Meara. That he raised this level of ire was unsettling. There was no room in her wrath for proper courtly politeness, diplomacy and protocol. Rothana's face burned with a passionate fire that reminded Kelson of Mairona.

"Aye, God help me," he admitted sadly, wondering if the stirrings in his heart were for his current wife or the wife that could have been, lost some years ago to religious service.

"He will have to," the princess returned harshly, pushing past him to kneel on the prie-dieu. "Does she not hurt enough? I will remain here for the rest of the day, praying for God to melt your anger and show you forgiveness, and assist me in forgiving you for what you just did to her. I never thought you capable of such callous cruelty! You are beyond my help."

"Rothana!" he pleaded, but she paid him no heed, crossing herself as she settled into her vigil. He had turned away slowly, sorrowfully, leaving to seek out Duncan and Cardiel in their town lodgings.

That visit had brought little peace, so now, in the middle of the night, he was returning to meditate and try to open his heart to Christ's will in that very same chapel. It was down and across the hall, off the first floor of the south tower. The hall was much smaller than the great space at Rhemuth, but seemed cavernous in the dark as he carefully threaded his way past the men and women sleeping noisily on the rushes. Grunts from a far corner showed that one pair was too busy to sleep, and he was grateful to reach the relative solitude of the south tower where he could shut out that sound. The moment he pulled open the door in the tower's entrance, though, a new clamor of a woman's sorrow assaulted his ears. After closing the door gently behind him, he crossed the castle's round private receiving room that led to the chapel. The crying grew in intensity, and whoever it was sounded like they were suffering from raging anguish or hopeless despondency. Perhaps he should summon Duncan or Cardiel to the castle? At least he should determine who it was before rousing one of the bishops in the deep of night.

Quenching his handfire in the growing candlelight spilling from the chapel, Kelson eased himself through the entrance. A woman lay on her side before the altar, her body folded protectively over her pregnant belly as it shuddered with great, wracking sobs, oblivious to anything around her. Blond curls gleamed orange in the ruddy candlelight, shivering as they cascaded across the floor. As if that didn't identify her clearly enough, he recognized the bedrobe that had been a wedding gift from his aunt, the finest wool died crimson, trimmed with fur and edged with dainty golden Haldane lions worked around the hems.

What possible cause would she have to grieve? He had given her life, and worked around the law to let her keep Druimfada in principle. Dhugal's words haunted him, though, giving the answer. *"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."*

They mingled with Rothana's own earlier accusation. *"Does she not hurt enough?...I never thought you capable of such callous cruelty!"*

He knew Dhugal had spoken what he perceived as truth, but Kelson had not believed until he saw with his own eyes, and suddenly the justice of Rothana's words pierced his heart. Oh, dear God! Anger has sheltered me from my pain, but her guilt has forced her to drown in the full measure of hers. She was willing to give her life for mine twice over, and I let her suffer so. How could I have played the Doubting Thomas and allow this to go on so long?

Rothana's prayers for him to find forgiveness were answered in the queen's anguish as he rushed to the altar and fell to her side, putting his arms on her. She coughed in an effort to stop the sobbing, twisting to look at this unwelcome intrusion on her grief. Her eyes were red and swollen, her cheeks and upper lip glistened from countless tears and a runny nose. "Do not touch me!" she shrieked, cringing away when she recognized him.

"Mairí?" he reached tentatively, but she shrank away and slumped against a wall.

"I have tried," she choked, laboring to spit her words out. "God knows—I have tried—to release the ties—binding me to you. Why did you—bring her?—Why do you flaunt—her in front of me?"

"Mairí." He got to his feet and started toward her. She scrambled to escape again, but he swooped quickly to take her head firmly in his hands as he crouched over her. Thrashing like a cornered animal, she lashed out wildly with fists and feet until he was forced to let go her head so he could trap her flailing arms and sit on her to avoid being kicked in the crotch. "Mairí, stop it. Look at me. *I said look at me!*" His voice turned lethal and she fell limp, eyes wide in fear, but she would not lift her gaze to his. "Very well," Kelson continued in a more even tone. "If you will not look, then listen. Rothana is my cousin through marriage. Nothing more."

He felt her body coil as she thought this over, but memories of an earlier encounter right here in the chapel bade her reject his words. She renewed her struggles with greater fervor.

"Stop fighting me and Truth-Read if you do not believe! Rothana is only my cousin, and was at Rhemuth to show her son to Aunt Meraude. She accompanied us here because her knowledge and training will help us examine the altar at Druimkyriel. That was no liaison here you saw earlier. She was urging me to forgive you for the sake of my soul, and trying to explain how the righteous path is not necessarily an easy one."

Mairona stilled, all will to fight stolen by the truth he spoke. Tentatively, and still looking warily to the protection of his groin, Kelson released her and backed away to sit against the wall, knowing that his touch was unwelcome. The cool stone felt good against his blazing cheek, soothing the fire of anger, grief, and lost love that now burned a cleansing flame within him.

His wife quivered as she pushed herself off the floor, arms and head quaking as she finally looked at him. "You are truly here for the ruins?"

"That is not all," he said softly.

"Oh, God, it is the annulment!" The trembling in her arms grew violent, and she could barely hold herself off the ground.

"There will be no annulment. I came for you, Mairí."

She gaped at him, instantly numb, then her elbows collapsed and she fell back to the floor. Suddenly he was lifting her off the ground, and the numbness faded as he cradled her to his chest, where she buried her face in his bedrobe and sobbed. One arm crept around Kelson's waist, and when he didn't protest or move away she threw the other under his arm and around his back to squeeze as tightly as she could, seeming to think he would vanish if given a chance. He thought his ribs would crack under her vise-like hold as she cried herself sick.

In offering, Kelson shared his own pain with her, an ache in his soul that had now shifted from betrayal to loss. Her own distress, somehow slipping through tightly shuttered shields, was equal to his, but then she tentatively exposed her outer mind and he was nearly overwhelmed in the emotional chaos that streamed through the opening. Kelson wrapped her with what comfort he had to provide, which hardly seemed adequate in his own turmoil, but the attempt in itself seemed enough for now. Her eyes burned, her throat was raw from choking and hiccups, and the tears spent themselves until there was nothing left in her. Her body stopped shaking, and with his help her breathing gradually evened, but she still radiated a primal anxiety.

"Mairí?" he asked in alarm, shifting her weight to relieve a tingling leg.

"Hmmm? Oh." She almost chuckled through the final tears, and ended up with a fit of hiccups instead. "'Tis the little one, not me. When I am upset it disturbs her." Mairona's eyes widened briefly as she extracted an arm and rubbed her very runny nose on the sleeve of her bedrobe. "She also kicks harder to show she is not happy."

"That is the babe?" Kelson asked in awe, looking at her belly.

Mairona tried to smile, and almost succeeded. "I must calm her, or she will beat me all night." She placed his hand on her stomach, inviting him to join her as she wrapped the girl child in love and comfort. After a moment's hesitation, he conceded. *Kelson, meet your daughter.*

It was wondrous. The babe's consciousness consisted of unguarded feelings, as she was yet too young for coherent thought, but she was already learning to share her awareness. When she recognized her mother's loving touch, she stilled quickly, then showed curiosity at a new presence. Mairona's mind and soul were the only ones she knew so far, were her entire world. Now that sphere had expanded to bring another, a new entity offering love and comfort just like her mother. With even the memory of distress gone, the babe rolled around contentedly and decided to nap.

"She sleeps already?" Kelson wondered.

"Aye. She dozes and wakes as any infant, and not necessarily at the times her mother wants. 'Tis little rest she has allowed." Mairona patted her stomach gently.

Evaine. It was barely a mental whisper, and Mairona was not sure Kelson knew she had heard. She gave him a questioning look, so he explained. "Her name will be Evaine, after Camber's daughter."

"I like it. Evaine." Mairona snuggled her head between Kelson's neck and shoulder. He stroked her hair automatically, twisting her curls around a finger out of old habit. Her breathing slowed and deepened as she relaxed, molding to the shape of his body. Shifting his hold on her, Kelson sighed when he realized she was falling asleep. She still dreamed, and had easily fallen prey to the hope of forgiveness and a return to the way things were. He had forgiven her, but there could never be return to those innocent days before her betrayal. His heart did not sing so freely with love, but perhaps it could learn to do so again. There was still a connection pulling him to her, and it felt right to hold her. How long it was since she had slumbered peacefully in his arms!

"Mairí," he whispered. "Come to bed with me."

"What about Dhugal?" she yawned.

"He belongs with Ailín, not me. Come."

With a final snuffle, she let Kelson lift her to her feet and take her hand to draw her out of the chapel, but she paused in front of the altar and pulled away to kneel briefly at the prie-dieu, crossing herself. Kelson withdrew a little, and watched as she bowed her head to her hands.

Teo gratias, Domine Deus. I have no words to give You, Lord, only my vast gratitude. Truly You do answer prayer offered with love. Help me to be worthy of the great gift You bestowed on me not once, but twice. At a loss for more to say, Mairona simply took a moment to offer the celebration in her heart as thanksgiving.

In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen. Crossing herself again, Mairona lifted her gaze to the simple crucifix hanging over the altar. In the flickering candlelight it seemed that the Christ smiled at her, but in a moment the illusion was gone. Sighing in release, she pushed herself up from the prie-dieu and turned to her husband, who held his hand to her in welcome. She placed her fingers in his, and let him draw her out and across the hall to the north tower.

As Kelson eased open the door to the top chamber, he held his fingers to his lips for silence as his mouth spread in a mischievous grin. She complied as Kelson's handfire sputtered to darkness, and she slipped silently into the room behind him as he crept over to the bed and slowly pulled back the heavy curtains. Very gradually, he took a firm, wary grip on the coverlets and furs that swaddled Dhugal, who was now quietly snoring in oblivion. Yanking hard, Kelson twisted back as Dhugal tumbled to the floor, sputtering and flailing to free himself from the tangle of linen and skins. As soon as the border duke was sufficiently liberated, he rushed at his unseen attacker, who sidestepped the charge and rapped him soundly on the shoulder. Overbalanced, Dhugal stumbled into a wall, barely avoiding a crack on the head. Mairona nearly giggled when he passed by the window, and dim moonlight revealed that Dhugal had slept more customarily than Kelson, without any clothing.

"Kel," he muttered, finally recognizing his assailant's psychic stamp as he straightened and rubbed his bruised shoulder. "What was that for?"

"Stealing all the furs and leaving your king to freeze. I have decided to trade for a warmer bedmate."

Giggles breaking free, Mairona summoned golden handfire to light her face and wiggled her fingers at Dhugal in greeting. Even in the dim glow she could see his freckles disappear in a dark flush as the duke realized just how exposed he was, and what those exposed parts must look like shriveled in cold.

"Weel, gimme summat tae cover myself at least!"

Snickering at how Dhugal's speech reverted in his embarrassment, Kelson opened Dhugal's trunk and called forth his own crimson handfire to rummage for one of the border duke's woolen tartans, which he tossed at his blood brother. Dhugal caught it easily, wrapping the wool around his waist and over his shoulder, securing it with a firm knot in the absence of the regular belt.

"Assaulted by my own blood brother while I sleep." Now that he was recovering, Dhugal could once again call on his cultured court language as he moved grumpily toward the door. "Ailín makes softer and kinder company in bed."

"I should hope so!" Kelson laughed, shoving Dhugal onward. "Go on, steal her furs instead." Still grumbling, Dhugal wrenched the thick pine door open and slammed it after him.

"I do not think he appreciated your jest," Mairona bubbled with giggles. Kelson still laughed as he retrieved the tumbled furs and coverlets, tossing them back on the feather mattress.

"I did not appreciate turning into an icicle. Come now." Discarding his bedrobe on the floor, he slipped Mairona's off as well and drew her to the curtained bed. "I am not accustomed to mountain winters, and I need warming."