

## ✘ Chapter 44 ✘

Mairona gradually became aware of her baby's resentful prodding and a heavy pressure that constricted her breathing. Her eyes were glued shut as her sleep-filled mind wrestled with the source of her discomfort. Something was pressing her down on her stomach—*someone was laying on her!*

Who would have dared enter her bedchamber? Who would have dared even more, to enter her bed? It was Rolf, Rolf had returned, and Mahon was with him, leering, and oh, God, Kelson was pointing a finger at her in accusation! Next to him was Rothana, wearing a queen's crown, condemning her ungodly ways with laughter—

Panicking, she exploded out from the heavy body and surged through the thick curtains to the icy room beyond. She shivered in the chill as the cold brought her body to wakefulness, though her mind was still gripped in her dream's reality of an intruder in her bed. She pressed against an icy stone wall as she gasped for breath, struggling for what to do next. How could she call attention to a strange man in her chambers, when she was unclothed?

"Mairí?" a voice called, then a head peeped out from the curtains, disheveled black hair tumbling about fair skin and gray eyes dimly visible in the weak light of a new dawn.

"Kelson," she breathed, sagging in relief. "Tis only you."

His face went blank. "Who else would you expect to find in your bed?"

"I do not know," she whimpered, squeezing her eyes shut. "I was dreaming, horrible things, of Rolf, and—and—Mahon—and—you said it was my fault, and—Rothana laughed—"

"Mairona, come here." She didn't obey, but she opened her eyes to stare at his features, which had become friendly again. "Mairí, there has been enough hurt between us. Come." His eyes drew her away from the wall, step by tentative step, until she was near enough for him to take her hand and pull her back onto the great feather mattress, where he scooped her shivering body close.

"Rolf and Mahon are gone, beyond touching you," he whispered in her hair.

"And Rothana is two floors below us," she countered, sniffing with the threat of renewed tears.

"Aye. She and I spoke of you, many times. Do you know what she said?"

"I do not want to know!" Mairona sputtered, twisting away from him. He held her firmly, not letting her turn her back.

"She said, 'The queen sounds like a lady of extraordinary courage, to stand in the way of an assassin's blade.' She then asked if I missed you."

Sniffing again, Mairona turned her head back to Kelson. "What did you say?"

He reached up and smoothed her hair behind her ear. "I asked her how she knew, and she said, 'It is in your eyes. There is a look there that was once meant for me, but I see it now belongs to her.'"

"I do not deserve it," she mumbled, closing her eyes. Tears squeezed from between her lashes, and Kelson wiped them away with his thumb.

"You did not deserve to be shut up here for five months. I let my anger rule my judgment, and I should know better. I am sorry."

She began crying in earnest at that. "I should be dead for treason, and you are sorry for leaving me alive in my home?"

Kelson pulled her close again, pressing her head to his shoulder. "I should be dead twice over; first by an archer's arrow, second by Fergal ó Hearne's hand. Yet I am here, because of you." She quivered silently, her weeping evident only by explosive gasps of breath. "Hush, you have shed enough tears."

"I will be haunted by my deed until the day I die!" she exclaimed, burying herself deeply in his chest so he could not see her face. He let her hide, and worked his fingers into her hair to lightly caress her head.

"I finally found forgiveness for you, Mairí. It is time for you to forgive yourself."

"It will never be the same," she cried. "I thought it could be in the chapel, but that was foolish."

"It was," he agreed, running his hand down to the small of her back "When we wed, we did not know each other as well as we thought, and discovery has brought pain."

"Aye," she agreed. "If I had known at Rhemuth, or on the march, I would have confessed, I swear!"

"I believe you now," he whispered.

"Why now?"

"Your missive," he replied. "I have searched throughout my realm for hints of St. Camber, and thought so far my hunt had come up empty. Now I find that he sent me one of his heirs to take to wife, a precious daughter of his blood, and blessed our union, which was also sanctified by God Himself. You are meant to be my queen, not put away in the loneliness of the mountains. Your missive showed me plainly that Gwynedd needs you."

If he believed that Gwynedd needed her, then perhaps she really was safe and secure in his arms. Her face twisted up out of his chest, and her arm circled his waist as she blinked up at him with tear-stained eyes. He thought they still looked red in the growing dawn, which wasn't surprising considering how much weeping she had done that night.

"We cannot change the past," he told her gently, "but we can leave it behind and build on what we now carry."

"Is that possible?" she snuffled.

"It will not be easy, but it is in our power." He kissed her forehead lightly, then settled himself comfortably in the pillows. "It has been a long night. I think Dhugal will see that we are not disturbed if we sleep a while longer."

Giving a little sigh, Mairona tried to fit herself to her usual place against him, but her growing belly made it awkward. Instead, Kelson urged her to roll away from him, and he pressed himself to her back, wrapping his free arm around to hold her close. It was one thing that hadn't changed, his need to shelter her in the fold of his arms, and her need to be contained there. "*Mo ghrá thú,*" he whispered in her ear, a little surprised that he really did mean it.

"I never stopped loving you," she responded, clutching his hand and pressing it close to her

heart. "I do not think I could."

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When they did wake again late that morning, word had come that masons working at Druimkyriel were still puzzling on how to safely open the underground chamber with minimal damage, so Kelson decided it would be better to postpone the visit for another day and hold formal court in Druimfada's hall, to check up on its local chieftains. Once Dhugal had made certain he was suitably decked out, he turned to see how Mairona was faring under Saraid and Ailín's assistance. She was simply dressed in green silk and wool, similar to the fare of a baron's daughter she had worn when she arrived at Rhemuth, though in deference to her larger belly she had dispensed with the silver belt. She also wore the same clasp bearing Druimfada's invincible tower to secure a minimally adorned cloak, and while she reserved the queen's right to keep her hair unbound and free of the married lady's veil, it was tamed by the same silver circlet she wore at her welcoming feast in Rhemuth.

"You look more a Mearan maiden than my Queen of Gwynedd," he frowned. She shrugged sheepishly, giving him a sad smile.

"My royal regalia are still in Rhemuth. I did not think to ever need them again."

"For certes we can improve on that," Kelson muttered, kicking open the lid to his portable chest of belongings.

"I do not think anything of yours would fit me well enough," Mairona told him. "Your riding leathers were big on me last summer."

"You are not as small as you were last summer," Kelson reminded her. "Here. It will not matter if this is too long." He offered a scarlet mantle to Saraid, lined with white fur and worked with a cloth-of-gold lion rampant in the center. As she assisted her mistress in the exchange, Kelson continued to dig around until he found a square wooden box, a little over three hands in measurement and two hands high. Its shape gave Mairona a clue at what it contained.

"I know none of your circlets will fit me, and it would not be appropriate for me to wear them," she protested.

"I think this one will do fine." Standing, Kelson turned to his wife and opened the box, presenting it to her. Her breath stopped short as she saw what it contained, and her eyes glittered.

"My consort crown! I almost did not dare believe, but you really did come for me!" Her voice caught as her fingers slowly reached to touch the elaborate gold work, running over intricate tracings of oak leaves surmounted by stylized crosses and studded with rounded jewels.

"Aye," he concurred. "Our marriage was sanctified, so it must be valid as long as we both do live. Duty bade me take you back as my wife and queen, but I did not expect this duty to be such a happy one."

"Oh, Kelson," she breathed, looking up at gray eyes that shone with future's promise. Pushing the box out of her way, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly. Kelson jiggled the box at Dhugal, prompting him to take it, then set his arms around Mairona's thickened waist and surrendered himself to the first taste of her in months.

When the kiss ended, Kelson rested his cheek briefly against hers, reluctant to part just yet. When he did pull back a little, he saw that deep emotion played openly on her face with an intensity that matched the unexpected fullness of his heart. Brushing her lips again briefly, he waved Dhugal forward as a brilliant idea bolted through his head.

"Brother, would you take it ill if I relieve you of your responsibilities in Meara?" he asked. The duke's eyes widened in surprise, then he shook his head.

"Nah, I have known it was only mine in passing. Cassan, Kierney, and Transha are enough to keep me occupied, and I generally spend most of my time in Rhemuth anyway."

"Excellent." Kelson turned to take the crown from its padded silk bed.

"What do you plan to do with Meara?" Mairona asked, stepping back so Ailín could remove her silver circlet.

"Make certain another Pretender never rises, but that will be discussed later. I believe you have been missing this." Holding the crown briefly over her head, he brought it to rest on her brow in an echo of her consort coronation in Rhemuth's cathedral. With its placement her back straightened a little more, her hands fell to her sides with a touch more grace, and her eyes flickered the barest hint of new determination. His queen was returning to him.

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Rothana stood with the Archbishop Cardiel and Bishop Duncan McLain at the head of Druimfada's hall, and watched the foreign Mearan mountain men that crowded its space. News of this royal court had run rampant through Druimfada Town, and it seemed as if all the town elders and landowners had packed themselves in the tight space, jostling behind Druimfada's lesser chieftains. Two of the neighboring lords attended as well, since they resided less than half a day's ride away. The Mearans whispered as Mairona's herald descended the stair and rapped a great wooden staff on the floor three times.

"All attend!" the man cried. "His Royal Highness, the High and Mighty Prince Kelson Cinhil Rhys Anthony Haldane, by the Grace of God, King of Gwynedd, Prince of Meara, and Lord of the Purple March!"

Said king appeared at the head of the stair to begin the royal procession opening court. The whispering surged in intensity when, instead of immediately descending the stair, he turned and offered his hand to their lady, decked in a bright crimson mantle. Rothana caught her breath when Mairona came into full view and she saw the Queen Consort's crown on her head. The hall fell silent. Rothana's lips spread in a bittersweet smile as Mairona placed her arm on Kelson's, and he folded her fingers in his hand too tenderly to be dictated by mere duty. Together they descended the stair and processed regally down the short space of the hall, king and queen come to present themselves to their subjects.

The head of the hall had no dais like in Rhemuth, so a raised platform had been hastily constructed by Druimfada's carpenters that morning and draped in any sort of scarlet cloth that could be found. The king ascended its steps, followed immediately by the queen, whom he placed to his right. She took a step back, leaving him alone at the top of the short stair. The Mearans crowded forward, not wanting to miss a word.

"Men of Druimfada, men of Meara," Kelson called in the now-deadly silence. "You have long expressed a desire for a Queen of your own blood, a ruler who also bears the blood of your royal House of Quinnell." He smiled at the hall. "We have come to realize that it is useless to argue with the will of Meara."

Murmurs ripped through the hall, and Mairona's heart thudded as she started following Kelson's intentions.

"We wish there to be lasting peace between Meara and Gwynedd, so all may prosper. We now see that the current order is not satisfactory to our Mearan subjects, and we now see fit to decree its change, according to your will. The Lord Dhugal MacArdry McLain, Duke of Cassan, Earl

of Kierney and Transha, is no longer our viceroy here.”

The murmurs swelled and filled the hall with speculation until Kelson had to raise his hand for silence. The sound lessened, but when men realized it wouldn't disappear it started to intensify again. Kelson caught the eye of the herald still standing at the bottom of the stair to the north tower, who rapped his staff on the floor three times, and the hall deadened.

“Gwynedd and Meara were united through the marriage of our great-grandfather, King Malcolm, and your Sovereign Princess Roisian. It will remain united by our will. We now intend to achieve your end and ours in our new viceroy of Meara.”

Without turning his eyes from the men in the hall, Kelson reached his right hand behind him. Barely breathing, Mairona took it and let him pull her to his side. “Men of Meara, we present to you the Lady Mairona Brigid ní Dhugain de Haldane, Queen of Gwynedd—and Viceroy of Meara.” Kelson raised her hand over his head, and the Mearans exploded in cheers that reverberated back and forth in the space of the hall.

Sighing, Rothana wondered how he could be so gifted at instilling fervor in all those within his presence. *King Kelson the Peacemaker*, she mused to herself, wondering if this peace would indeed last when his charisma had removed itself back to Rhemuth and the plains of Gwynedd. History did not bode well, but perhaps a viceroy and queen of their own kind would finally assuage this odd people. The hall still thundered, and she watched both Kelson and Mairona steal a glance at each other. A spark danced between them when their eyes met, and as one they revealed their Deryni auras to shine and dance amid the jewels of their crowns; one glowing a brilliant Haldane crimson, the other its counterpart in shimmering gold.

His soul had found peace, so Rothana considered her task in Rhemuth complete. There was still a dull ache that accident and her religious vocation had prevented her from being Kelson's wife, but she offered that sadness up to her Lord until there was only room for contentment that this king she cared about so deeply had once again found happiness in his queen.