

✠ Chapter 45 ✠

Kelson urged his mount to stretch out further as he raced Dhugal along Druimfada River's banks. They were finally on their way to Druimkyriel, but the two young men had tired of their party's slow pace dictated by Mairona's pregnancy. To get his blood moving, Kelson had challenged Dhugal to this contest. Kelson seemed to gain on his lead, but as they approached a line of trees Dhugal pulled ahead by half a length, and that was how they finished.

"You would not do so well if I were on one of my own steeds," Kelson proclaimed as his horse blew out its nostrils.

"I did that well when we were children!" Dhugal shot back, a grin splitting his face.

"We were still on ponies, then!" Kelson returned. "Shall we rejoin everyone?"

Dhugal nodded, and they turned their horses back, letting them walk to recover from their effort. "So, how are things going with Mairona?"

"Better than I expected," Kelson responded thoughtfully. "There are moments when it seems we were never apart, so I suppose there is hope for the future. There is still much hurt to mend, but there is no denying or discounting the power of the bond between us. I am only now realizing that I was missing a part of myself. You must know what it is like, Dhugal, when you were separated from Ailín while we were in Eastmarch and then here at first in Meara."

"I do not think so," the border duke countered. "I hold Ailín in high affection, and she makes for fine sport in bed, but I do not think we share what you have. Ailín is still so young, and was ill-prepared to become my duchess."

"What do you mean?" Kelson looked at his blood brother with concern.

"She is—like to a skittish doe, poised to flee through the wood. She was taught to fear Deryni, only to find she is one herself and now surrounded by us. I know she was not treated kindly in her father's house, and she mightily fears—I do not know what. Abandonment? Displeasing me?" Dhugal sighed. "Occasionally I see a flash of spirit when she is comfortable with her surroundings, especially when she thinks she is alone with Mairona."

"Do you regret marrying her?"

"Nah." Dhugal's coppery border braid flopped as he shook his head. "She is a sweet little sparrow. I am grateful that I saved her from the cruelty of her father's house and a marriage to Lord Drostan, for it is believed he killed his late wife."

"Drostan is three times her age, is he not?"

"I believe so," Dhugal returned. Kelson snickered. "What?" the border duke demanded.

"Ailín was to marry a man who could be her grandfather, and found the idea distasteful?"

"She called him an old drunken lout, and she was being kind. My own words for him would not be fit for gentle ears," Dhugal informed Kelson, who snickered again. "I still do not see what is so funny!"

"Faced with Drostan, she finds she has captured your attention at my wedding feast. Let me see—old heavy-handed Drostan, or the dashing young eligible Duke of Cassan, blood brother to the king? I wonder who seduced whom in my gardens?" Kelson laughed. "She may have more promise

than you think."

"Bloody hell!" Dhugal exclaimed. "It never crossed my mind! She seems so timid most of the time."

"She is only fifteen, Dhugal, and may not even know what you expect of her. If her father has treated her unkindly—well. I remember how Princess Janniver feared all men at first after she was violated at St. Brigid's, then abandoned by her intended husband and her own father. If Ailín has lived with cruelty her whole life, is it any wonder she is timid when she is afraid? Give her guidance, with patience and kindness, and she will grow."

"I hope she will have the time," Dhugal murmured.

"What do you mean?" Kelson asked anxiously. His blood brother sighed sadly.

"She has been ill for several weeks, and tries to hide it from me. She will not see a physician, and my Healing skills cannot help with disease. I think it is growing worse."

"I am sorry, Brother," Kelson replied softly, reaching across to lay a hand on Dhugal's shoulder. "We will be returning to Rhemuth in a few days. Once there, I will order her to see my physician, and she cannot refuse. Let her be angry at me, for if she is gravely ill she will need you."

"Thank you, Brother," Dhugal whispered back.

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As the king and Duke of Cassan raced each other far ahead, Mairona quietly mulled over her thoughts. Should she, shouldn't she, should she—aye, it was for the best, and no use in dawdling. "Ride on," she told Ailín and Saraid, pulling her horse over to the side and holding it back as the party passed her by. Rothana eyed her warily as she approached, and nearly looked aghast when Mairona urged her mount in line with hers.

"Princess," Mairona greeted.

"Your Highness," Rothana returned softly.

"Kelson told me of your kind words in Rhemuth, when we were parted. I thank you," Mairona offered.

"You are kind," the princess returned. "I only spoke true of what I observed in his words and manner."

"Such honesty is rare," Mairona commented, "and that kindness is rarer, especially between two such as us." She gave a half smile. "Kelson longs so to restore the cult of St. Camber, and I know that as a Servant of St. Camber and a Haldane by marriage, you are like to spend much time in Rhemuth. I do not wish to begrudge you your place in Kelson's life. I cannot say this was always true, nor that it is easy, but you are his cousin now, and there is much you can do to help. Rivalry between us will only work to his detriment."

"I agree," Rothana replied. "I am content that he has found happiness."

"Good," Mairona sighed. "Tell me, if things had fallen out differently, what did you wish to achieve for Gwynedd as queen?"

Swallowing visibly, Rothana's eyelids fluttered as she called upon a lifetime of training to remain calm. "I wished to help Kelson restore the Deryni schools that flourished in Camber's time. All the Servants desire to see this happen."

"Then you may lead the Servants to make it so."

Daring to look at the queen, Rothana's fingers fluttered briefly on her reins. "You ask me?" she wondered huskily.

"Who better? Kelson will be well occupied in assuring that Torenth is stable enough for Liam's return to his people. I will be distracted for the indefinite future keeping my own Mearans in line following Gwynedd's Crown, and unable to give proper attention to the school's founding. You have the vision, you have the Servants, and you have ties in the Forcinn States, where Deryni and their learning are not feared today. If you can bear to be at Rhemuth with more frequency, and tolerate working with me, perhaps you may help Kelson fulfill one of his dreams after all."

Closing her eyes, Rothana dipped her head as tears squeezed between her lashes. She could never be Kelson's wife, but could the love she still bore give him one of his fondest dreams? "It would be my great honor," she whispered. Mairona smiled kindly, wondering at the sympathy she felt.

"It is nigh on impossible to stop loving him, is it not?"

Rothana's breath caught, and her body jerked as she examined Kelson's queen, looking for the source of this observation, its intention. Had her shields slipped? Just how good was the queen's Deryni training?

"I have tried and failed myself," Mairona continued.

Shuddering, Rothana bid her tears to cease and batted them away from her eyes. "I have been Called to serve God, and learned most painfully that it is foolish to question that vocation."

Mairona saw Kelson and Dhugal coming to rejoin the party, so she decided to end this awkward phase of their conversation. "Everything works to His purpose, as I have recently learned through prayer. My royal blood from the Quinnell ties is much too diluted to have ever caught Kelson's attention on its own. If I had not been hailed as a Pretender Queen and party to treason, I would never have gone to Rhemuth and Kelson would not have been able to offer Meara a queen of its own people to bring peace. Perhaps if you and Kelson had never loved each other, there would be no one to fulfill his dream of making Gwynedd the seat of Deryni knowledge and learning."

"Perhaps," Rothana breathed, startled to hear such wisdom from one outside the Church. "I thank you."

Dhugal had fallen in by his wife's side, but Kelson continued back. Rothana's eyelids wavered when he reined in by his queen.

"Seeing the two of you with heads bent together is enough to give me grave cause for concern," he jested with feigned grimness. Rothana was taken aback, but Mairona saw through his play and gave him a game grin.

"Aye, we are engaged in plots and intrigues by the score!" she returned, then her face fell in horror when she realized the implications of her words as a haunted look simultaneously flickered across Kelson's face. "I am sorry," she whispered. "I did not mean it that way."

"I know." Securing his mount's reins in one hand, Kelson reached the other across to caress her arm briefly, then urge her own hand away from the reins to be enfolded in his. "I encourage you to use your abundant talents at intrigue to my favor, so long as I am kept informed."

"We were about to discuss the need for a suitable land grant," Mairona continued, taking her hand back with a small smile.

"For the Servants?" Kelson asked.

"Partially," Mairona confirmed. "I believe the princess has agreed to a partnership with me." She turned to Rothana, prompting her to continue. The princess' eyes glittered as she spoke.

"Her Highness has asked me to lead the Servants in the founding of a Schola Deryniana, an it pleases my lord king."

Kelson looked at Rothana in astonishment, then at his wife as he laughed in even greater amazement. "This pleases me greatly," he assured Rothana. "With the two of you working together, and my patronage, how could it fail? I will grant you whatever you need." Still laughing, he spurred his horse to a trot so he could rejoin Dhugal ahead, thinking that perhaps not all dreams had died. If this one still lived, what else could be resurrected?

Rothana and Mairona turned as one to Cardiel, who was just behind them, and must have overheard their conversation. He smiled and nodded the Church's support of their plan, raising a hand in benediction of their cooperation.

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The reunited party crested the last ridge to make the descent to Druimkyriel Church, Dhugal riding with Kelson at the front, followed shortly by Ailín, Mairona and Saraid. The queen thought that the young duchess was not looking well, so when they came to a halt outside the ruins and Ailín pulled her horse away from the others, Mairona followed. The girl nearly fell out of her saddle, turning a ghastly green, and Mairona eased herself to the ground to assist when she saw that Dhugal's attention was occupied elsewhere.

"What is wrong, dear?" she asked.

"Nothing," Ailín protested, trying to find the strength to stand without clutching to her horse.

"You cannot deceive me. What ails you?"

Tears pricked at Ailín's eyes as she realized she could not lie to the Deryni queen. "I have been ill for a long time," she nearly cried. "Do not tell Dhugal, he must not know—Oh, God!"

Mairona shepherded her away to a stand of trees, holding her as she bent over. "How long?"

"Over two months," the duchess gasped, clutching her stomach. "It will be better by noontime. It always is."

Mairona could not see Ailín's face as she bent double, but she thought she could see a few tears fall to the ground. "This only happens in the morning?"

"Sometimes at night, too, after I have eaten."

"Have your monthly courses stopped in this illness?"

"Aye—Oh!" The girl heaved, and Mairona held her as she retched.

"Saraid!" Mairona called sharply over her shoulder. "I need water, and find a napkin or cloth, or like item!"

That got the entire party's attention. Ailín was too involved to panic that her secret was out as Saraid came running with the water and Dhugal with a cloth meant for their lunch. Kelson rushed to their aid as well, watching with sadness as Dhugal's conversation played out in reality. Mairona

withdrew to Kelson's side as Dhugal took her place, putting his arms around his wife as she threw up until there was nothing left to lose. Her tears fell openly as he helped her clean her face.

"I have known, lass. Why would you not talk to me?" he asked softly.

"If you fear the illness will spread, you would put me away, or leave me," she cried. Dhugal embraced her gently, shooting a look at Kelson as if to say *this is what I meant*.

"Hush, lass, dinnae think such thoughts. I willnae leave ye," he soothed her. "When we return tae Rhemuth ye'll see the king's physician."

"No need," Mairona countered. "She will feel better in another fortnight or so."

"What ails her?" Dhugal demanded.

"I would not call it an ailment," Mairona smiled as she approached to lay a soft hand on Ailín's arm. "Dear, do you not remember when you arrived at Druimfada how I would let no one in my chamber before late morning? Did you not guess you are with child?"

Her head shot up, eyes piercing Mairona as her tears lay forgotten on her cheeks. Dhugal looked as though someone had put an arrow through his gut, but the expression was more of blank shock than any pain or torture. Mairona squeezed Ailín's arm, then turned to rejoin her husband.

"Come, Kel, give them a moment or two."

"Aye," he agreed, putting an arm around her waist as they went to rejoin the morbidly curious group remaining with the horses.

"That is what you missed," Mairona stated. "It was not so bad the first few weeks as we marched on Meara, but I was miserably ill the second and third months."

"Then next time I get you with child, I will send you back to Druimfada to tend to Meara's business," he grinned. Mairona punched his arm more forcefully than he expected from a lady. "Ow!" he chuckled, rubbing the bruised area.

"So much as think that again, and I will never let you touch me."

"Mercy!" Kelson laughed, squeezing her waist. Mairona grinned back, then turned in his arm to look back at Dhugal and Ailín. The girl's head was pressed to his chest, and his was bowed on hers as he held her tightly. Dhugal must have been speaking softly to her, for she nodded. Kelson glanced back, too, then turned to his wife and looked her in the eyes.

"I wish it had been like that for us, when I told you about Evaine," Mairona murmured. "I am so sorry."

A glimmer of pain lanced through Kelson's eyes as he remembered how his heart had been torn by her confession in a war camp outside Druimfada's walls. "That is past, and must be left behind," he told her firmly. "When I get you with my son, it will be like that. For now, we must give thanks for what we have." He placed a hand on her stomach, where their own daughter grew. She smiled, placing her hand over his for a moment, brushing her shields against his in the briefest echo of Deryni rapport's communion. Closing his eyes, Kelson allowed himself to savor her touch.

"Oh, how I have missed you," he murmured to her. "More than I would let myself admit."

"Perhaps later?" Mairona offered tentatively.

"We will have to, for we will likely need rapport between ourselves and the others to

examine the altar. Best not be distracted by other desires, then. Open to me, my queen."

Letting herself be pulled into his arms, she released her shields to mingle with his, enfolding both of them in an exquisitely tender embrace. In the brief space of a few seconds, they shared their experiences of separation and the growing joy in reunion. Kelson was able to filter his memories for her, stripping most of the hatred and anger to avoid hurting her any further. He regretted that the controls he was forced to place on her last summer left her unable to do the same, would never give her the privacy that even a Deryni wife and husband should have from each other.

It does not matter to me, she reassured him. *'Tis small price to pay for your trust, after what I have done.*

Sighing with her acceptance, Kelson blinked his eyes open as he withdrew, pressing a tiny kiss on her forehead before they turned arm in arm back to the horses and the remainder of their party. Duncan nearly rushed them down, fraught with concern.

"Dhugal has told me," he said with anxiety as his eyes darted to his son. "How bad is she?"

"She will be fine," Kelson reassured him. "I cannot believe they never even suspected. Come next summer, you may be a grandfather!"

"What?" Duncan's jaw dropped in a lesser echo of his son's stunned face. "Ailín is with child?"

Chuckling, Cardiel came forward to lay a hand on his fellow bishop's shoulder. "Congratulations, my friend. Perhaps you will be able to share in the childhood you missed in your son."

"Aye," Duncan breathed, his face slowly splitting in a silly grin. "Not even hellhounds will keep me away. Thank You for Your mercy, Lord Christ," he offered heavenward with a sincere heart.

"They return," Mairona observed. Indeed, Dhugal and Ailín were approaching, swinging their joined hands as they both grinned like children. The duke and duchess were received with heartfelt congratulation, none stronger than Duncan's as he happily pulled his son into a bear hug and slapped him on the back. Mairona engaged Ailín in a gentler embrace.

"I am so happy for you, my friend," she whispered. "Later, if you like, I can show you how to determine if the child is a boy or girl."

Nodding, Ailín blinked back happy tears as Kelson took his turn and kissed her cheek. When he had tendered his good wishes, Ailín turned to Duncan.

"Father," she said softly, and somehow Duncan knew that she was not referring to his priestly title. "Will you give me your blessing?"

"Gladly, my daughter, and with a joyous heart." She bowed her head, and he placed his hand on it, whispering words that were for her and Dhugal's ears alone. When he was done, he signed the cross on her forehead, and she smiled as he leaned over to give a quick, warm embrace.

"Now," Kelson stated with mock impatience. "Will someone please show me this church?"