

✠ Chapter 47 ✠

Spring had not yet returned to Rhemuth plain in mid-February, but this winter had been as mild as the previous one was fierce, almost as if fall had never ended and intended to blend itself right into spring next month or so. The plain itself rippled golden green in the rare winter sun, strikingly beautiful as it stretched for the horizon. *Home*, Mairona sighed to herself as she leaned on the castle wall to ease her back. Her huge belly made the position awkward, but it relieved the growing cramps. In the outer ward below, masons were laying out lines at St. Hilary's where Kelson's Camber chapel would soon be built. Farther out on the plain, just outside the city, carpenters were raising the small cluster of buildings that would temporarily house the Schola Deryniana until more permanent quarters could be built. Everything was going smoothly. Well, almost everything.

Her initial reception at Rhemuth had a decidedly icy chill, especially from the Queen Mother. Kelson had never made public her act of treason, and officially, her time in Druimfada was spent trying to rebuild her town, but rumors ran as rumors will. Even though Kelson had made it clear that anyone wishing his favor would treat his queen with the honor and respect her station deserved, there had been whisperings and sidelong glances wherever she passed. She had wished mightily for Ailín's company that first month home, but Dhugal had wanted to take her on a progress through his lands, introducing his people to their duchess in Cassan and countess in Kierney and Transha. Now they had settled in at his childhood home in Transha by the northern sea, deep in his beloved borders, and Ailín was likely to remain there until their son was born.

It hadn't mattered the first few weeks they left Druimfada, because she and Kelson had journeyed to Laas, the ancient Mearan capitol. There he once again presented her as Viceroy of Meara, this time to all of Meara's greater lords. Her reception there wasn't quite as passionate as in her home of Druimfada, but they did warmly welcome her as one of their own. Only then came the trials of Rhemuth.

At least Gwenthwyfar had remained friendly, and Meraude, Nigel, and their sons warmed eventually as Kelson made it clear that she was freely forgiven and unable to deceive him any longer. That was the hardest loss—the freedom of privacy. However, the alternative was powerless exile, heart-wrenching loneliness, and permanent separation from her daughter if she were born safely. That was no alternative to Rhemuth, with Kelson and his circle of family and friends, who were gradually accepting her again.

Richenda had turned genuinely warm, now that she and Morgan had taken up temporary residence at Rhemuth in preparation for the royal princess' impending birth. Her renewed friendship was probably at Meraude's promptings, for the two had long been close. Both duchesses would certainly assist when the time came for Mairona to take to childbed. Morgan, though—he seemed friendly enough, but occasionally she caught him looking at her askance. Mairona supposed it couldn't be helped. He was Kelson's sworn Protector, after all, and she had flirted with regicide. At least Morgan's Healing skills might come in handy if the birth didn't proceed normally. The struggles and dangers of childbed were surprisingly frightening for one as accustomed to peril as she was, and it was immensely reassuring to have the Deryni duke on hand.

So much had changed—and she missed Fergal terribly. She would never forget the haunted, desperate look of betrayal on his face as she stood by Kelson and renounced her oldest, dearest friend, or the glimpse of grief and horror in his eyes as his dagger found her instead of the king. Fergal had worked to gain her the Crown of Meara, according to her original encouragement, and then gotten hopelessly lost when she decided to walk another, greater path. It was not to be helped, though. Given the same choice a dozen times over, she would choose no differently. If Fergal had trusted her and loyally followed her lead instead of pursuing his foolish dream of marriage, he would yet live.

Things had even changed between her and Kelson, though it wasn't all bad. The naïve, carefree abandon and unquestioned trust they had once relished privately with each other were long gone. On the other hand, they no longer took anything for granted. Each small moment was treasured for the gift it was, which brought a quiet joy that ran deeper than the initial reckless passion that flamed hot their first few months together. The scars between them were still tender, but in their healing they had somehow knit closer together with a greater respect and understanding of each other's needs as husband and wife as well as king and queen.

Sighing, Mairona focused her attention back on the school under construction. Rothana had found three teachers among the Servants, and Mairona had persuaded Duncan to share his Healing skills if any Deryni were found with the proper potential. She herself would instruct, when time allowed, and of course, Rothana would teach. There were too few trained Deryni in Gwynedd to quibble about the inappropriateness of a lady acting as tutor to young men as well as girls. Archbishop Cardiel had handpicked three clerics to teach less esoteric subjects, such as Latin, Greek, history, and philosophy. Now the search was on for suitable pupils, and if St. Camber were with them, the school would open before the summer was over. Deryni scholarship would once again live openly within Gwynedd's borders.

Mairona's thoughts were interrupted when she sensed her husband approaching behind her on the wall walk, and she smiled softly when he enfolded her in his arms, wrapping his cloak around her.

"A *stóirín*," he whispered as she snuggled against him. "What are you thinking?"

"How so much has changed, Kel," she answered, groaning in pleasure when he released her to dig his knuckles in her painful back. "Our mad journey together all began right here, the day I arrived in Rhemuth."

"Nay," he chuckled. "It all began when you stormed my hall, disregarding all protocol to stare me straight in eyes. I think I knew even then that I was looking at my queen."

Smiling, Mairona leaned heavily into his hands, encouraging him to push harder on her ribs. "Ahhhhh," she breathed as he seemed to hit the right spot. "I love you."

"I love you," he responded as he turned her around, twisting over her immensely swollen abdomen to kiss her. She met his lips warmly, but pulled back short, grimacing as her body stiffened and her hands went to her belly.

"What is wrong?" he demanded. Her face showed surprise.

"I have been having pains for days, but now—" She grimaced again. "I believe little Evaine may want out."

"Is everything happening all right?" Kelson asked nervously.

"How should I know? I have never done this before!" Mairona snapped, then instantly softened. "I am sorry, I should not be so sharp, but this frightens me. You had better see me to my chambers if this is starting in earnest."

He first took her in awkward embrace, offering his own fear over her fate in childbed, which claimed nearly half of all mothers. Once they had found strength in their shared anxiety, he helped her down the stair, held her arm across the garden, and followed with a hand on her as she ascended the Queen's Tower to the solar. There he once again took her arm as she cast about for one of her ladies-in-waiting. "Gwenhwyfar?"

"I am here, my queen," the girl answered, coming forward.

"Dear, summon Richenda and Meraude, and tell them the child comes. Then keep everyone else away. I would not burden others with my temper."

"At once, my lady." She curtseyed quickly and ran off.

"Kelson, help me to my bedchamber before you are chased out," Mairona demanded. He supported her while she navigated the short distance to her rooms. As she moved to settle on the edge of her bed, he knelt beside her.

"What can I do?" he asked, fidgeting.

"Stay with me until the duchesses arrive," she said, "then pray for us."

"I promise—" he started to reply, but was interrupted when the door burst open and Meraude rushed in.

"That was quick. You must have already been on the stair." Mairona gave her a strained smile, then went taut as another pain came.

"How are you, dear?" the older woman asked, taking her hand.

"Hurting at the moment," she gritted through her teeth, then relaxed as it passed. Meraude turned to her nephew.

"Nigel will keep you company in the hall if you wish, Kelson," she said pointedly. He knew it to be a dismissal, for this was a matter where women ruled even kings.

"Thank you, Aunt," he replied, then leaned forward to kiss his wife on the forehead. "May the Lord God and St. Camber keep you safe," he whispered before leaving.

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He had spent two hours in his chapel, beseeching God to grant a safe delivery for mother and child. *Please*, he begged. *We have not yet had much time together, and I have foolishly thrown most of that away. I could not bear for You to take her away from me so soon, Lord.* When he could pray no more, he found Morgan and his uncle in the hall ready to see their king through this new trial. Two meals had been brought since that time, but Kelson had barely touched either of them.

"I cannot stand this!" he stormed, pacing a distance in front of the stair to the solar. "How long will she be? My wife is upstairs giving birth and there is *absolutely*." He kicked a bench. "*Nothing*." Another kick. "*I can do!*" he concluded, pushing the seat over. "I feel so useless!" Chagrined at his show of temper, he picked the bench up and started pacing again.

"Kelson, these things take time," Nigel told him. "It took Meraude from dusk till noon the next day to birth—Rory." Morgan knew from memory it wasn't Nigel's oldest living son who was such a problem. Kelson figured from the pause that it must have been the traitor Conall, but put that out of his mind as he determined to take his uncle's words in the reassurance they were meant.

"I wish I knew if she were in danger!" Kelson exclaimed in annoyance.

"I am certain that Richenda and Meraude would not hesitate to call me if something were wrong," Morgan soothed.

Kelson paused and blanched. "She is in such pain, and it gives her no rest," he said softly.

"You can feel her?" Morgan asked, astonished, since Kelson was separated from Mairona by

a good distance and several walls of stone.

"Aye," Kelson confirmed, sitting back down before Morgan and his uncle. "It seems to be a side effect of the pathways I placed in Druimfada camp. She can have no privacy from me, which does not seem fair."

"You cannot think to remove the blocks?" Morgan demanded.

"Not so loudly!" Kelson said, flashing warning at the duke. "Perhaps someday, but not now, nor anytime soon." His eyes went glassy for a moment as his focus shifted within. "I can feel her so strongly, she is exhausted."

"That is normal, and it is likely the ordinary emotional struggles of childbirth that allow you to sense her so closely," Morgan reassured him, then tried to lighten Kelson's spirits with humor. "After this, it may be many months before she willingly shares your bed again."

The king smiled, appreciating the duke's efforts. "I will find a way to seduce her, believe you me. We were apart for five months, and when Mairona returned she was too far gone with child for any real sport." He shrugged.

"There are some pretty serving wenches around that could have filled in," Morgan grinned.

"Aye, Mairí would take kindly to that. If your wife can kill a man by her own hand, you do not bring another woman to your bed," Kelson quipped. Unbuckling his mantle, he half-stood to pull it off and handed it to the silvery-blond duke, running a finger along his tunic collar. "It grows warm in here."

Nigel and Morgan looked at each other, knowing the temperature hadn't changed in the past hour or so. "Tis from all your pacing," Nigel told him. "You looked like you would wear right through the stone in your determination."

Snorting at the jest, Kelson drummed his fingers on the tabletop before him. Morgan sank next to him, noting that the king's foot tapped nervously, too. "It has been ten hours. The child could appear in a few moments, or it could be all night. The first birthing is supposed to be the hardest and most unpredictable," he advised Kelson.

"Alaric!" Morgan turned around at the sound of his name, seeing Richenda appear from the stair. She was wiping her hands on a towel stained with red. "Alaric, we need you. There is too much bleeding, and the babe has not yet come."

The duke glanced at Kelson, who was near panic. They bolted for the stair as one man, knocking the bench over with a loud clatter.

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It took all of Kelson's considerable self-control to let Richenda and Morgan precede him to the queen's chamber. He knew there was little he could do, but no earthly force was going to keep him from that room while his wife was in trouble. Morgan was preparing to wash his hands when Kelson gained the door. A birthing stool sat unused in the center of the room, which meant that his wife must be ailing too much to remain on it. "Mairí!" he called, rushing to the bed where she was propped up on dozens of pillows. The feather mattress was lined with leather and covered over with linens, preventing damage to the valuable bed and clean furs underneath. Kelson took his wife's hand, and she squeezed his painfully.

Kelson calmed his anxiety for Mairona's sake, then took a cloth from Meraude and wiped the sweat from her brow. His aunt then slipped into the background, knowing only Deryni skills would help until the child was actually born.

"Kel, it is hard," Mairona panted. "I cannot do this."

"Hush, a *stóirín*. Save your strength. Alaric is here to help."

"My queen," the duke called, toweling off. His eyes were glazed, already entranced. "I am already joined with Richenda, for her assistance and knowledge in these matters. I would also link with you, to see better what is happening."

Mairona nodded with a jerk. "Go ahead. My shields are a mess, you will have no trouble." Touching her forehead, Morgan established rapport quickly.

"Kelson, do what you can to relieve her pain," Morgan suggested as he brushed Kelson briefly to send a private message.

At this point, Richenda is usually convinced she is going to die. Do not believe Mairona if she speaks so. I will let you know if there is any real danger. Be prepared, for she will likely say a great many things that she does not truly mean. Do not take offense at anything, no matter how outrageous.

Nodding gratefully, and knowing that Richenda had survived not only the birth of her eldest son by her previous husband, but Morgan's young Briony and Kelric as well, Kelson settled in as the duke moved down to rest his hands on Mairona's swollen belly. He opened his familiar link with Mairona, placing blocks to shut out the worst of her agony.

Thank you, Mairona sent, loosening her death grip on his hand. On the off chance that this parasite does not kill me, I will never let you touch me again!

It was impossible not to laugh after Morgan had teased him about the very same thing. *Would you deny your lord husband the right to ravish his wife?* he chuckled.

If you try, I will slice your throat! she returned, taking deep breaths during her respite. Kelson looked startled and stricken, newly-healed wounds scraped raw. His eyes went to Morgan, the father figure who was always his rock of strength in times of need. The elder duke just smiled and shrugged.

I did warn you. Take no notice unless she repeats that sentiment tomorrow, he sent briefly before turning his focus in to the happenings in Mairona's abdomen. Morgan quickly found the source of the hemorrhage in her womb and staunched the blood.

Take no notice?!!! Mairona shot to all in the link. Kelson, the only thing that would save you from my hand is the fact that I am dying!

Morgan ignored her rantings, and so did Richenda, who spoke to her husband in her familiar mind-voice. *Alaric, the queen and infant are finally ready. The sooner the babe is born the better for the mother,* she told him.

I want her out NOW! Mairona agreed forcefully.

Richenda moved down to the queen's knees. *When the next pain comes, push as hard as you can.*

Nodding, Mairona tried to lift herself up to a more comfortable position. Kelson helped, positioning the pillows to hold her up. He then wrestled his warm outer dress off, leaving only breeches and undertunic. Meraude had to help him with one sleeve when he got caught just as Mairona felt another contraction coming on.

I am here, he told her, taking her hand again. Crunching up, Mairona pushed until she thought she would be ripped apart. Kelson shuddered from the pain he channeled away from her, and yet she still cried out. When it was over, it seemed she couldn't breathe fast enough. At least the babe had moved, that was obvious

Almost done, Richenda told her encouragingly. *Only a few more*.

Just pull her out! Mairona grumbled as she gasped for air. There was only a moment before the pain came again. She crushed Kelson's hand with unnatural strength, but he didn't notice. This time her agony was so intense that he screamed with her, sweat soaking his linen shirt. If this is what women had to endure, no wonder she threatened him with death rather than risk this again.

I can see the head! Richenda said excitedly. *Only one more!*

One more, she says, Mairona griped. *Whoever said women were the weaker sex never gave birth!* Her thought was clipped when she was wracked with the next wave. She pushed with all her might, Kelson giving her strength when she would falter. Richenda reached to take the babe's shoulders and pulled while Mairona squeezed. The infant girl slipped out into the duchess' capable hands.

Meraude dashed forward with clean linens to wipe out the girl's nose and mouth while Richenda tied and cut the birthing cord. When the babe drew her first breath, she screamed in protest at the sudden cold and bright light. Looking up, Kelson's face split into a silly grin as he first laid eyes on his daughter, discolored and smeared with the juices of her mother's womb. Mairona didn't have the strength to lift her head.

"Is she whole?" the queen asked in exhaustion, closing her eyes.

"Well formed, with all ten fingers and toes," Meraude confirmed happily. "She looks perfect. You did well, dear. She must be bathed now, then you may hold her." The new great-aunt took the infant to a pan of water set by the fire to keep warm. Morgan shifted to relieve a leg gone numb, but stayed in contact to make sure everything finished safely.

"You are not done yet," Richenda told the queen. "The afterbirth must still come."

Grimacing, Mairona turned her sweat-soaked head. "I only want to sleep for the next month," she grunted. Kelson rose to sit next to her on the bed, wiping off her face. "Here it comes," she muttered.

There was a lot of blood. Kelson stared horrified as it gushed from between her legs. "Alaric!" he yelled.

"Tis normal," Richenda said calmly. "This is only the afterbirth." Sure enough, a mass of bloody tissue came out in the mess. She quickly wrapped it up and put it aside, as Morgan satisfied himself that there was no further hemorrhaging. With that out of the way, Richenda retrieved another pot of warm water and bullied her reluctant queen off the bed so the linens could be changed.

"Kelson?" his aunt called from the fireplace. The baby had been washed and dried, and was now swaddled in warm, soft cloth, but she still fussed. "Tis not many men who witness the birth of their child. Would you like to take her?"

Awed, he gently lifted the tiny, wriggling package from Meraude, tenderly cradling it in the crook of his arm. Emotions threatened to overwhelm him as he noticed a scattering of black fuzz on her head, an unmistakable stamp of the Haldane blood he passed on to his daughter. Her eyes were still screwed in complaint of this strange, new surrounding. *Thank you, Lord, for keeping my wife and daughter safe*. He brushed her mind with love, and was delighted when she recognized his

touch. She calmed at the familiar, reassuring presence and blinked up at him with squinting eyes. Kelson stroked her cheek with a finger as she stared at his face. He happily remained like that for several minutes, caressing his remarkable newborn daughter with immense love.

Shifting the little bundle, the new father finally looked up at Meraude with a grin that could have infected his entire kingdom. "Summon Father Duncan to the chapel, so she may be baptized," Kelson told her. Meraude smiled and patted her nephew's shoulder, then went to go find the bishop.

"She shall be christened Evaine," Kelson told no one in particular as he lifted his daughter to kiss her forehead. His eyes met Morgan's as he lowered her. "And Alaryse, after the man who kept her mother safe through birth," he added. "Will you stand godfather to my firstborn, Alaric?"

The Deryni duke was visibly moved, knowing the king welcomed this child no less for being a girl and not an heir. "It would be a great honor," he replied with a weary smile. "Thank you, Kelson."

"Evaine Alaryse Haldane," Kelson whispered to his daughter.

Richenda had finished removing the soiled leathers from the bed and bathing Mairona. She helped the queen into a warm shift and made her comfortable on clean pillows.

"Kelson?" Mairona called, her voice foggy with exhaustion. He approached her and laid the infant on her chest. It was her first look at her daughter, and she smiled tiredly as she snuggled Evaine to her, but then she looked up uncertainly at her husband. "I am sorry, for those things I said before. I do not mean it."

"I know," he whispered, kissing her forehead. "Alaric warned me to take no offense unless you threaten me again tomorrow."

Sagging in relief, she turned her gaze back to her daughter with more confidence, finally examining her. She had never been close to a newborn child before, and the sight was a bit disturbing. "I wish you luck finding a husband for that shriveled face, when the time comes," Mairona muttered. Kelson chuckled, running his finger against his daughter's cheek again.

"My cousin Eirian and my godson Kelric both looked like that when they were born. She will be fine, and will certainly grow to be as beautiful as her mother. You do not love her?"

"Oh, aye, of course I do! 'Tis a good thing you did take me back," she told him. "I do not think I could give Evaine up now. I would fight to my last breath to keep her, shriveled face and all."

Kelson bent down to kiss her gently. "Aye, 'tis a good thing," he whispered, "for I could not give *you* up, *a stóirín*. May Evaine grow to be as endearingly stubborn as her mother."

With a half smile, Mairona drooped against the pillows, trying with all her will to remain awake. "And as charmingly infuriating as her father," she added. They waited happily for Duncan to come from St. Hilary's, completely engrossed in their new daughter and each other to the exclusion of all else in the room. "*Níor dhún Dia doras riamh nar oscail Sé ceann eile*," Mairona whispered to Evaine.

"What does that mean?" Kelson asked her.

"'Tis an old saying. 'God does not close one door without opening another.' We have both endured much from our childhood. The Lord shut the door on my happy life at Druimfada. He then gave me your love, even though I did my best not to deserve the gift." Mairona closed her eyes, but they fluttered opened again when Kelson kissed the tip of her nose.

"It is past and should be kept there," he admonished her.

"Past or no, I was given more than I am due, and now He blesses us with Evaine. I only hope He does not hold me accountable for the difference when I bear your son, Kel."

"I have no fears. The Lord's love knows no bounds, Mairí. It will all be done according to His will, and He has cared for Gwynedd's needs." Looking down at his daughter, he agreed with his wife's assessment of the great gifts he had been given as he tenderly cupped the infant's tiny, fragile head. God's loving blessing in the form of his new little princess was unmistakable.