

✘ Chapter 1 ✘

It had been a rather tedious court, Kelson mused as he sighed to himself. Most were interesting, a few were entertaining, but today it seemed to drag endlessly. He itched to be elsewhere, especially with rumors of a small rebel faction rising in Meara again. Nothing dangerous, at least not yet, but he would have to do something about it when the spring thaw came. He hoped that his mere presence and a few well-chosen men taken prisoner would quiet things, instead of having to war again as he did just three years ago. The rebels claimed to have found an heir to the crown of Meara, and some were daring to call her queen. Kelson shook his head, thinking how far they must have had to stretch family bloodlines to find this "queen." The pretender Caitrin Quinnell's family had been neatly eliminated on his last foray, but her daughter Sidana in particular still stirred up unpleasant recollections.

But Meara would have to wait. This had been a long day of hearing relatively trivial complaints, and his crown was giving him a headache. He settled a feud between two hot-headed younger sons of some of his vassals and had them ushered out of the hall, so now it was time for the next hearing. The king removed the crown from his head and handed it to his uncle, Prince Nigel. In the relief of its absence, he rubbed his forehead and pushed raven black hair away from his face. Yes, it had been a long day, and no doubt would be longer still. Nigel presented a simple golden circlet to his nephew, who pulled it down on his brow in place of the heavier State crown. Kelson mused about taking a nice, hot, relaxing bath when the day was over. Yes, that would be nice.

The king was disturbed from his train of thought when he detected a disturbance at the rear of the hall. A striking girl, who couldn't yet be twenty years old, had entered the hall. Her features were plain, if well-formed, but there was something about her eyes that captured everyone's attention. A small disarmed guard and a handful of servants followed a short distance as she approached the dais. Kelson leaned forward, his interest roused from the previous routine boredom. He ventured a light psychic probe in her direction, which was gently but firmly turned away. The girl's aura flared briefly in reply to his probe, shining gold like the sun for a moment on her waist-length, curly golden hair. So she was Deryni. This could very well be interesting. Her eyes daringly met his, like clear emeralds, before lowering to the floor as she dropped in a deep curtsy before him. Kelson sent a questioning thought to his advisor Alaric Morgan, the Duke of Corwyn, as to her identity, but the reply was equally curious. His blood-brother Dhugal MacArdry was ignorant, so the king returned to the girl still bowed before him.

"Rise, my lady, and be welcome at our court," he said.

"I thank my lord king most graciously," She rose with a practiced grace, meeting his eyes again. "I have come to beg your Highness' mercy for aid and protection."

Kelson was both astonished and amused that she continued to look him in the eye. Very few people dared his glance on a first meeting, and proper court protocol dictated that vassals and especially women should avert their eyes. She may have been asking for his protection, but her confident disregard for proper demure behavior didn't give the impression of helplessness. It was unheard of to see this kind of poise in a young maid, for maid she must be. Her hair tumbled unbound in tight ringlets down her back, instead of being confined in the veil of a married woman. "Why do you ask for our royal protection?" he asked her.

"I am Mairona Ní Dhugain, daughter of Tiernan Ó Dugain of Druimfada. After my father's death, some are presuming to call me Mairona of Meara," she replied.

So this was the new "queen" the rebels were using as a rally. She was barely more than a girl compared to Caitrin Quinnell. Why had she come to him? And her eyes... This would be an excellent excuse to escape the drudgeries of this all-too-routine court. Relief had just entered his

hall, and she just happened to be very intriguing. "My lady, perhaps you would wish to accompany us to a more private setting?" the king commanded, rising from his throne. Apprehension flickered quickly across her face, disappearing behind a cultured mask in an eyeblink. Kelson had seen it, though, and with it a glimpse of the terrified girl underneath her trained composure.

"Of course, Sire," she replied, executing a partial curtsy. "I would beg your Highness's indulgence to let me bring my attendants."

"Very well, you may bring two or three only, no guards. We shall go to the withdrawing room behind the dais, an it please my lady. My lords of Cassan and Kierney, Corwyn, and Bishop Duncan, it would please us for you to accompany. Uncle Nigel, continue hearing claims," he ordered. Dhugal, the forenamed Duke of Cassan and Kierney, Morgan of Corwyn, Duncan, and Nigel moved to follow his orders as Kelson moved down the steps to offer his arm to the Lady Mairona. She accepted with a barely perceptible hesitation and let him lead her to a more private room behind the dais. One of her women followed, along with a man who appeared to be an advisor from his dress and manner. That he was also her bodyguard was known only to the Mearan refugees.

The withdrawing room was very small, lending to a more intimate atmosphere. Large windows facing an inner courtyard let abundant, luxurious sunlight pour in, though this time of year it did little to warm the room. Heavy wool tapestries warded away the stone walls' winter chill. Dhugal bent down at the fireplace, piling the wood better to start a fire. Kelson took one of the chairs for himself, then offered the other to Mairona. His advisors had to make do with simple stools. The girl's servingwoman and bodyguard stood off at a distance.

Kelson observed her for a several moments. Her gaze was steady and her breath even, but it was so regular he knew she was using a Deryni relaxation technique. Sweet Jesu, the things she must have heard about him growing up in Meara. It had taken some courage and daring for her to come to Rhemuth. Either that, or what she was fleeing was worse than the stories she had heard. Her attempts to calm herself were only working partially, though it took an unusually observant Deryni to notice. "Now, my lady, we may speak more freely. I know very well that there are certain men in Meara trying to stir rebellion again. I will not tolerate this. Meara is rightfully mine, as I proved on the battlefield three years ago. If you are Mairona that they would call queen, why are you at my court? This is a dangerous game you are playing."

"This is no game, my lord. I do not desire the crown of an independent Meara. I have just entered my king's court, openly acknowledging I am Deryni. Neither my mother nor any of her ancestors could do that. I have been able to receive the training that has been denied my forebears. Your Highness has done great things for our people, and I have no doubt will do still greater things. If for no other reason, your Grace has won my complete loyalty, and I have come to Rhemuth to try and prove my fealty," she told him.

Shifting in his seat, Kelson found himself wanting to believe her. He was relieved that Truth-Reading confirmed what she said. However, as much as she fascinated him, he had to deal with practicalities. "My lady, you will be made welcome here under my protection. However, I will need to know about these Mearans calling for independence in your name."

"I am prepared to tell your Highness all I know," she answered simply, never faltering under his intense scrutiny. He locked on her eyes in silence, using the feared gray Haldane gaze that seemed to bore down to the very soul, but the only visible sign of her discomfort was a nervous flick of her fingers.

"You do not frighten easily, do you?" he smiled softly.

"On the contrary." She returned his smile, a little shyly. "My home has been taken from me, my people are at the mercy of a tyrant, and I have come to a court unfamiliar and foreign to me. I am terrified, your Highness."

The king noticed with approval that she spoke of her people as well as her estates or lands. "Well then, you are very brave, a worthy successor to Caitrin Quinnell." He studied her closely for her reaction. To his surprise, though it was almost imperceptible, she flinched.

"It is not by choice, Sire. Caitrin was only a distant cousin of mine, and there was a falling out between our families generations ago. I believe I was chosen as her successor because it was thought, being a young lady, I would be biddable. That I am not."

Kelson's face warmed at her reply. "I can see that plainly. You will be treated gently under my protection. You do not have to fear for your person so long as you do not break faith with me, and later we may speak of your people, since there is nothing to be done immediately in this weather. I am certain you have had a long, tiring journey here in these unforgiving storms, and would wish to rest." He glanced the room, trying to determine who would make her feel most at ease. Perhaps a priest? "Father Duncan, will you be so kind as to make sure Lady Mairona is installed in the Queen's Tower?"

Mairona sucked in her breath inaudibly. Queen's Tower. Was there any meaning in that? The king had seemed friendly at the last, but tales had been told of his duplicity. Was there a hidden meaning, could he be playing on her unwanted title of Queen of Meara? And a priest to escort her! Could that be for her shriving? Good God, this must stop. The King of Gwynedd had given her no reason to believe he wanted her blood. On the contrary, he seemed most eager to discover her knowledge of the Mearan rebellion. Rhemuth Castle was a royal seat; had always been so under the Haldanes. Of course there would be a Queen's Tower, with three or four separate chambers, just as there was likely a King's Tower. Her thoughts whirled so quickly she barely heard the bishop's reply.

"It shall be done, my lord," Duncan said.

"Very good." Kelson turned his attention back to Mairona, saw that her composure was slipping. He hoped that it was the strain of her flight starting to show, and that he didn't personally frighten her this much. "My lady," he started with his most charming smile. "The chambers you are to be installed in are just under the Queen's chambers now occupied by my lady mother, and are nearly as comfortable. If you do want for anything at all, please make it known." She relaxed visibly, so he continued. "I shall send for you when I need your assistance with the Mearan problem. Until then, be welcome at Rhemuth and know you may stay as long as you wish." Kelson's eyes were no longer frightening, but welcoming as he stood. Mairona rose just a moment after him.

"My king is most kind, Sire. I express my heartfelt thanks."

"I have made a vow to protect my people, my lady. It is my joyful duty. Good day." He offered his hand in leavetaking, which she took as a subject should. However, before she could bow to do obeisance, he bent to kiss her fingers. The touch of her smooth skin set his lips tingling. She was blushing, aware of the new nature of his attention, when she finally curtsied her leave of the king.

"Your Excellency," she bowed to Duncan, kissing his ring. They left together, with her maid Saraid and the bodyguard following silently.

Kelson watched very carefully as she left, and continued to watch the door after she was gone. "Sweet Jesu, she is beautiful," he breathed. Dhugal and Morgan exchanged glances, both thinking the girl striking, but not an extraordinary beauty. Grinning slyly, Dhugal turned back to his king and blood brother.

"I cannae believe me eyes. The king is smitten by a lovely lass, an' I didnae even hae to get 'im drunk," he ribbed, laying on his border burr thickly.

"Not on wine, at any rate," Kelson grinned, finally turning from the door.

"Marriage to this 'heir' they've found could help resolve the Mearan conflict for quite some

time," Morgan ventured cautiously.

"Aye," the king replied distractedly, lost in thoughts of thick, blond curls and emerald eyes—Morgan raised an eyebrow at Dhugal when the expected outburst against marital advising didn't come. The king shook his head, as if clearing a foggy dream. "Well, I had better relieve Nigel," he grinned, leaving the room without waiting for Morgan or Dhugal to accompany him.

"He must really be taken," Dhugal wondered aloud, switching back to his cultured court accent.

"Tis about time," Morgan replied. "Gwynedd needs a queen, and if I read her correctly, she could make a good one."