

❖ Chapter 2 ❖

The two rooms Mairona had been given were spacious and luxurious, with a large stone fireplace in each. Fireplaces, not central hearths or braziers! They spanned the entire second floor of the Queen's Tower, and were much larger than she thought she warranted. Her single chamber at Druimfada was much smaller than this, and it suited her better. The king was trying to impress his power and wealth on her, or give her a warm welcome, or both. Then again, she was considered the Queen of Meara by some. She had difficulty accustoming herself to that new rank.

So, she was an honored guest, at least for now. What did the king hope to gain from her? What game was he playing, what were the rules, what purpose lurked behind those perplexing gray eyes? If she could only determine that, she could play to her advantage.

The first room, which she had decided to use as a sitting and drawing room, had three large windows facing the gardens now sleeping in winter's death. Each of them was recessed, with cushioned seats on either side for reading or needlework. The abundant light was an unanticipated luxury. Mairona had ordered the heavy tapestries pulled back from the windows to let the sun shine in, even though it also admitted an icy draft. The sun was so rare in late February, however, that she didn't mind the chill. She was from the Mearan mountains, and was accustomed to bitter winters. Besides, the fireplace did a fair job of alleviating the cold. That in itself was unusual. She had changed from her muddy riding cloak and the dress underneath to something a bit more genteel, if simple: a soft, deep blue wool that complimented her green eyes, lined with fur at the hems, and a woolen cloak. A plain silver circlet bound her hair away from her face, her hair braided around it then cascading down her back.

Some dried fruits, bread, and cheese had been provided immediately for her refreshment. She nibbled on them as she watched her maid, Saraid, direct the unpacking and placing of her things. Mairona had only brought three servants and her bodyguard with her, besides the soldiers for escort, and they were very busy under Saraid's close surveillance.

Arriving at Rhemuth was much easier than she had expected. The journey itself had been hard and slow, taking more than two weeks as her party was hit by storm after storm. The winter was harsh, even in the lowlands. Thankfully, that had been the hardest part of fleeing to the king's court. She had expected pursuit, and anticipated an icy reception at best.

Mairona had not quite known what to expect of the King of Gwynedd. Two kinds of stories circulated throughout Meara; those told by the rebels of his tyranny and presumption to hold a land not truly his own, and others from men loyal to the king, about his strong sense of duty, justice, and mercy. She had decided to take her chances on the latter. So far the justice and mercy version had played true, though he had given her several heart-racing moments during her audience. Behind the easy smile he had shown at her dismissal, he was the king, and all-powerful. That was unquestioned, and that was what terrified her. Those rumors about his peculiar Haldane eyes had been true. What could a man hide behind those piercing pools of gray? What could they see beyond the realm of physical vision?

He had tried her somehow, in the withdrawing room, with those quicksilver eyes. She didn't know what the test was, but she seemed to have withstood its challenge. Maybe he had used his Haldane powers to read her without her knowledge, circumventing her Deryni defenses. Maybe he was only trying to disturb her composure. Whatever it was, she was still astonished that she hadn't been completely unnerved. That knife-like stare had been so unnatural. Yet he had treated her kindly and mercifully, and there had been a genuine twinkle in his eye when he smiled at her. What could her fate really be at court, though? The unwilling center of an unlawful insurrection? This had been her only real choice, though, the best way she could escape the Mearan web of treachery and foul Rolf's unspeakable demands. Was she escaping from being a Mearan pawn only to become the unwitting instrument of a much greater man? She knew very well how the king had looked upon her

when she was taking her leave. Many men had looked at her that way, desirous of Druimfada's wealthy holding. Did the king now see her as a means to solidify his hold on Meara?

Mairona ní Dhugain was her father's heir, and so Druimfada was her inheritance. Many men would marry her without a moment's hesitation simply for her land and wealth. So far, she had skillfully avoided their nets, knowing they could never care for Druimfada and its people as she did, and a husband would get in the way of her duty. Now circumstances seemed to be forcing her hand, though. Would she be compelled into choosing between Rolf, who would force her into a marriage if she returned alone to Druimfada? Or the King, who could solve his Mearan troubles so neatly by wedding the girl they would call their Queen? He might demand that as his price for winning her lands away from Rolf of Tirkeeve. After all, that was exactly what he had tried to do with Princess Sidana before her murder. Would he pursue a second chance? Or would he marry her off to a trusted ally? Worse yet, if he merely desired her body, he could require her to share his bed without the sanction of marriage as payment for the return of Druimfada. Hell and damnation!

She sighed explosively at the station circumstances had forced on her. Mairona was only a distant cousin of Caitrin's, and now being hailed as royalty or traitor was unsettling. It was not something to which she wanted to accustom herself. Not in this manner. It was all much easier when she was just the Baron of Druimfada's daughter, able to engage in her own pursuits under the indulging eye of her father.

A knock on the door roused her from her thoughts. Saraid sent a questioning thought, and Mairona signaled her to answer it as she took a bite of crusty bread. The serving woman opened the heavy oak door to a squire dressed in the crimson and gold Haldane livery. "I bear a message from the king for the Lady Mairona," the boy stated, nodding politely to Saraid.

"This way," the maid directed, standing back to let the boy in. Mairona sat up straight, putting her half-eaten chunk of bread down as the boy's questing gaze found her. He approached and bowed with a friendly smile.

"My lady, his Highness the King wishes me to bid you welcome and hopes that you find your chambers adequate and to your liking. My lord also invites you to share his trencher at a feast in your honor tomorrow night," the squire recited carefully.

"In my honor?" Mairona breathed, somewhat astonished. She quickly regained her court face. "Tell his Highness that these rooms more than meet my needs, and he is most generous in feasting in my name. I would be honored to share the high table with my king on the morrow," she replied.

"I shall convey your message to his Highness. Good day, my lady." The squire bowed again and was gone. Saraid closed the door after him.

"I was waiting for that to happen," the attendant smiled.

"What do you mean?" Mairona asked. "Of course it was going to happen. The new Queen of Meara has just delivered herself into his hands, winning him a bloodless preliminary victory. Even though I have pledged my loyalty, he must still show me a spectacular welcome." She shoved the bowl of food away from her, appetite gone. This was the beginning of the game, the dealings and maneuverings she could play well when she chose, but found so distasteful.

"Aye, my lady, he will give you a warm welcome. I saw the way he looked at you in the hall." Saraid sat on the window seat across from her lady's chair. Mairona blushed.

"I am a simple baron's daughter, not worthy of a king's attention," she mumbled. "My family's title was never even confirmed by the Haldane kings."

"Your poise in that hall commanded the attention of every man, woman, and child in it, most especially the king's. You are worthy of his attention, my queen," Saraid stated.

"Do not call me that!" Mairona returned vehemently, her eyes flashing. "I am no queen. Meara is Kelson's, and you would do best to remember that."

Saraid froze for a moment, surprised by her lady's unusually harsh tone. She had been so certain that Mairona was desirous of the Mearan crown, and then this pell-mell flight to Rhemuth had set everything she thought she knew about her mistress in disarray. After a few beats, she continued cautiously. "There are those who would say otherwise, my lady. You may not want such a station, but you must not forget that others see you as such. Do not dismiss the king so lightly. Or is he not desirable to you?"

"You of all people should not be trying to marry me off, Saraid. He is handsome enough, and he has done good things for the Deryni. But I do not yet understand what his intentions are," Mairona said, smiling to put her servant at ease again. "Saraid, could you find out the standing of his honor? I would like to know how I may expect to be treated."

"Of course, Mairona," Saraid grinned, believing that she had gotten her mistress to consider the king's interest. That same mistress turned to her trusted bodyguard.

"Seánin, you will choose a man to discover the king's character. I must know how far I can trust him."

"It has already been done, my lady," Seánin bowed. Mairona nodded approval.

"Good. Saraid, fetch a clean heavy cloak. I intend to take in the air of the gardens to help me think more clearly." Mairona rose from her seat, stretching. "Seánin, you will accompany me at a distance. I desire to be alone with my thoughts."

"Aye, my lady," he bowed again. His mistress nodded her thanks before turning to the windows. The large, glazed windows, with a view of gardens gripped in winter's death. There was glass in her own apartments at Druimfada, but nothing like this. The keep at Rhemuth betrayed the king's wealth in simple luxuries. She reached out to rest her fingertips on the glass, like ice on her skin.

"My lady Mairona?" Saraid called, holding out the requested cloak. Turning away from the window, Mairona stepped to where her handmaid could remove the woolen indoor cloak, and lay a heavier, fur-lined replacement on her shoulders. Mairona tugged the proffered rabbit-skin gloves over her hands as Saraid deftly fastened the cloak with a round clasp.

"Thank you, Saraid," Mairona smiled. "Now I will get out of your way so you can finish your work. Come, Seánin."

The bodyguard followed in silence as his mistress glided through the door and down spiral stairs. There were two exits at the base landing—one to the great hall, and another to the solitude of the gardens. Mairona chose the latter and pulled the cloak's hood over her brow to protect against the biting cold. Here she could expect to remain undisturbed amid the bustle of the royal seat, thanks to the weather.

Her feet wandered aimlessly along snow-encrusted pathways as she forced her breath to come evenly, calmly, in a relaxation technique learned in childhood, a lifetime ago. It cleared her head of distracting chatter, directing her thoughts to the challenge ahead and back to the home she had lost.

Druimfada was nestled in the craggy Mearan mountains, and so had been left in pleasant isolation for generations, away from the reach or concern of Haldane kings. Mairona preferred it

that way. After all, she knew her people better than any outsider ever could, and they loved their lady in turn.

Now that all must change. Druimfada was thrust before the Haldane's attention, and she was forced with it. She may get her lands back, but she would likely be required to marry a man of the king's choosing to bind her more closely to Gwynedd's crown. Damn Rolf for taking her lands, damn the king for her need of him, damn them all!

Her thoughts were disturbed by Seánin's rustle of motion. Lifting her head, she observed a man entering the gardens, wearing the scarlet and gold which marked the royal House of Haldane's senior branch. Edging noiselessly to her bodyguard, she cast about her for an easy means of escape. Her eyes lighted on an arched, covered walkway that lay in deep shadow, safe from the king's notice. Catching Seánin's eye, she motioned to her getaway and took flight. A chance gust of icy wind caught her bright sapphire cloak, billowing it behind her as she whirled toward safety. The flash of brilliant blue betrayed her.

"My lady Mairona, is that you?"

He knew perfectly well it was her, and she knew that he knew. A deep breath helped school her features into a pleasant expression as she turned to meet him.

"Your Highness," she greeted, dropping in curtsy too quickly. Her rear foot met a wayward patch of ice and nearly skated out from under her. Seánin caught her arm before she could fall on her backside. "Damn!" she muttered under her breath as she fought for balance while trying to remain in obeisance.

"My lady." The king finally reached her and helped her up. "Are you alright?"

"I am perfectly fine, Sire. The path is more slippery than I realized." She withdrew her gloved hands from his and pulled back into her cloak.

"You are fortunate to have an attentive friend with you," the king remarked. "Sir, I remember you from my first meeting with your lady."

Mairona caught his unspoken command for an introduction. "Sire, this is Seánin Ó Dugain. He is my trusted advisor."

"Your Highness," the man bowed deeply.

"A kinsman?" the king asked Seánin.

"Nay, Sire, merely a clansman."

"I see." He turned his peculiar gray gaze back to Mairona. "I would have thought the weather too harsh for idling outside, my lady."

Raising her chin, Mairona looked him dead in the eyes. "I was born of the Mearan mountains, my lord. I do not shy from a little snow."

"No, I imagine you would not." Amusement played at his eyes as he studied the puzzling girl who stood so proudly before him. His humor diminished as he caught a glimmer of anxiety in the way she held her lips. Her land had been taken away from her, and all she had left was her pride and determination to win back what was hers by any means necessary. Kelson had a curious desire to give her comfort. "Come, my lady. If you are determined to brave the chill, let me show you the view from the walls. The clouds have cleared, and it is rather breathtaking when the sun sets on the snow."

He noted her pause before she conceded. "Aye, my lord, if Seánin may accompany me."

"That is acceptable." Kelson's hand flashed, and a guard in scarlet livery approached. Mairona's eyes widened, darting between the king, Seánin, and the very large man who teemed with various forms of weaponry. Looking at her calmly, Kelson gave her a slight smile. "If I am not mistaken, Seánin is your protector as well as advisor?" Mairona nodded fearfully, knowing she could not lie to a fellow Deryni. "I also have a personal guard, and there is always at least one in my presence. He does nothing unless I am threatened with physical harm. Do you understand?" Mairona nodded again, though her eyes still flashed fear. Oh, she understood all right, but could she trust him? "Good," Kelson continued. "Let us go."

Swallowing visibly, Mairona just gaped at his proffered arm. "My lady?" Seánin asked, stepping to her side. She turned her head to him.

"I am fine, Seánin," she replied with firm voice, then directed her gaze back to the king. He showed no apparent offense at her hesitation. "I follow your lead, your Highness," she stated, taking his arm.

Her hand trembled, noticeable even through thick gloves, and her breathing was too even to be natural. Kelson placed his free hand firmly over hers, holding it still. Why was she so frightened of him? How could he win her trust?

"My lady, I am most interested in hearing the current talk in Meara," he started, directing her to a tower opposite the one in which she was housed.

"Of the rebellion?" she asked, forcing her voice to be even.

"Nay, there is time enough for that later. I was referring to tavern gossip, or the whisperings in ladies' solars. Am I still the demon king who rides a fire-breathing horse across the full moon, or have they conjured worse tales?"

Mairona looked at him in horror, drawn forward only by the pull of his arm. There was humor in his eyes, and a gentleness she had never imagined of the mighty Haldane. After all, he had personally ordered the execution of most of the remaining Mearan royals just three years past. Only Caitrin Quinnell had escaped the bloodshed that took her husband, sons, and nephew, but she had died a short year later, alone in a remote convent. Mairona's imagination conjured the horrendous image of devil's spawn that terrified Druimfada's children, and tried to reconcile it with the man before her. As the impossibility of the comparison struck her, a giggle erupted and was immediately fought down. "Forgive me, your Highness!" she blurted in panic, but he just chuckled at his own joke. The twinkle in his eye broke her giggle free again, and she felt some of her tension float away on the winter wind with her mirth.

"I believe your horse has become a scaly dragon in some parts," she returned audaciously. "Were you aware you have the power to bathe the moon in blood?"

His chuckle turned into hearty laughter at that, and he threw his head back in amusement. "You have spirit and wit, my lady," he complimented her with a grin. "I like that."

"I am my father's daughter," she answered simply, as if that explained everything.

Releasing her arm, Kelson shoved the tower door open and ducked out of the cold. When Mairona gained the entrance, he had already set his foot on the stair and was climbing, seemingly heedless if she followed or not. Taking a deep breath, she took to the spiral steps and kept easy pace behind him. The king didn't speak during the entire ascent, but every few rounds he chortled under his breath.

At the top, Kelson yanked the door open and was assaulted by a gust of swirling snow, stolen

from the tower's top to dance in the blustery weather. His furs protected him adequately from the icy blast, and Mairona seemed unfazed, so he beckoned her out past the sentry and onto the wall walk proper. "There," he breathed, gazing out over his domain with immeasurable pride and devotion. Mairona recognized his expression, for she had seen it in her own father when he spoke of Druimfada or surveyed his own lands from the keep.

Tearing herself away from old recollections, she turned her attention to the glittering snow-kissed plains that rippled away to a hazy horizon. They were tinted pale pink as the sun dropped low in the sky, bestowing a rosy glow on God's creation. "It is beautiful," she agreed as her eyes swept left, catching a length of lower wall that protected the city sprawled on the castle's opposite side. "And the city—Rhemuth is larger than I had imagined."

"Tell me about your home," Kelson requested. "What does Druimfada look like at sunset?"

Mairona cocked her head, surprised at the question. "It is very different, surrounded by mountains on all sides. Druimfada means 'long ridge' in the old tongue. The castle is nestled on the highest point of a long mountain, and the town is arrayed on a side that slopes gently away. The other side drops sharply, with a suddenness that makes you dizzy. At the bottom runs a small river, which turns to a copper ribbon when the sun is overhead. Hundreds of sheep graze the valley, looking like puffy little dots from the castle walls. Dawn comes late, and night falls early, because the surrounding peaks swallow the sun. If you are in the valley, though, the last crimson rays of evening catch the top of the keep and set it ablaze." Her eyes shimmered, and she dipped her head in longing.

"Keep faith with me, and you will again see the sun set in Druimfada," he swore, studying her closely.

"I do have faith, and you have my loyalty. That is why I am here." Her voice shook at the last, and she ducked from his gaze in embarrassment.

"But that does not ease you. Why?" He waited, but she did not answer. "Tell me," he prompted softly.

"Everything has changed, Sire." A ragged breath told Kelson that she was fighting intense emotion, but it never showed on her face. "I am a maiden, but I am not naïve. Rolf will die, and then what? You cannot let me be a rallying point for another traitor, even though my allegiance lies with you. You have not killed or imprisoned me outright. Therefore, as long as I am unmarried and at liberty, the risk remains. So I wonder, who is the husband you will get for me? Or will I be married to the Church, as Caitrin was?"

Kelson stared at her, amazed at her shrewdness. "Just how old are you?" he demanded. She sighed.

"I will complete eighteen years next month."

If memory served, the old so-called Baron of Druimfada had died three years ago. She had held Druimfada on her own since she was not quite fifteen. Another childhood stolen, as his had been when he assumed the crown on his fourteenth birthday. Six long years ago—a lifetime ago.

"You thought I might kill you? For what purpose?"

Swallowing audibly, Mairona fixed her eyes on a featureless spot in the outer ward below. "All others who claimed the royal blood of Meara have died by your hand. I recognized the possibility that I may meet the same fate."

Khadasa! If she feared death in Rhemuth, what on earth was she fleeing from? "Not all were by my command," Kelson whispered, watching the plains deepen to a rosy hue.

"No. Princess Sidana was murdered by her brother." Stealing a sideways glance, Mairona watched the king drop his head into his hands. He straightened before long, but did not look at her.

"Queen Sidana," he corrected. "She was my wife, even though it was only for a few minutes. Did you know she died in my arms? She had been taught to curse my very name, and had none but me to comfort her as her life ebbed away between my fingers."

The profound sorrow in his voice touched Mairona's soul. The king had executed the Sidana's brother Llewel for his crime, then her father and remaining brother for treason. He had much reason to hate the extinguished Quinnell House of Meara, so Mairona had not expected his grief. Tentatively, she reached for him, and he barely breathed so he would not frighten her again. Something sparked between them when their gloves touched. The jolt abruptly reminded her just who this man was, and why she was in Rhemuth. Her hand jerked back to the safe confines of her cloak.

"Do not fear, Mairona. Your life is safe in my hands."

"But not my unwed status," she returned.

"Why do you not wish to marry?" he ventured, determined to take advantage of her candidness. She sighed, looking at the horizon when she answered.

"Druimfada is part of me. My father raised me as his heir, and prepared me to hold his lands. Each townsman has a name to me, and the people in the outer villages are known to me by sight. When I marry it will all belong to my husband, and I will be unable to fulfill the duty my father entrusted to me. I love my home, and I mourn its loss."

"I understand," he murmured as he turned to her. She started, locking her eyes on his, but didn't speak. Sweet Brigid, it was like looking into her own soul. A bond was nascent between them, a link that had nothing to do with being Deryni, and the sudden recognition of it made her heart thump in a double beat as he continued. "I, too, know what it is like to live for a people and a land. I have fought to hold on to a duty bestowed by fate and blood, and fought for it out of love. I will not let anyone or anything take from me what is mine, just as I will not let anyone take Druimfada unlawfully. I will give you this: you will not be forced to take a husband you find distasteful."

So, it would be marriage, but she would not have to blindly accept whomever was presented to her. The sun hung heavily on the horizon, setting the castle and king ablaze in scarlet fire. The man she had been so fortunate to glimpse disappeared once again behind the crown he wore, and the bond that had taken her unawares faded, borne away on the wind. "Thank you, your Highness," she curtsied, once again the proper subject. Kelson sighed, wondering what had compelled her back to formality. He had much preferred her unceremonious frankness.

"Come, I will escort you back to the Queen's Tower," he stated without expression. This time he did not offer his arm, and she kept well behind her king as he led the way.