

✠ Chapter 3 ✠

Mairona was especially grateful for Seánin that night, for she slept so deeply that an assassin's knife couldn't have disturbed her. She awoke rejuvenated and strong, with a clearer head on her shoulders. There was no reason for her to fear the king to distraction, and that seemed plainly obvious in the light of morn. He was not going to take her head off her shoulders, though that was almost preferable to what her fate would be if she remained in Meara. He had promised to free Druimfada, and with his resources and power Rolf would surely be crushed neatly. That left this whole plaguing concept of marriage, which her every thought cried against. She needed solace, and guidance that could only come from above.

A young page boy had shown her the way to St. Hilary's-Within-the-Walls, a squat Romanesque structure that crouched beside the outer curtain wall. The interior space carried a taste of outdoor chill, but it was tranquil and welcoming. The Lady Chapel just north of the apse held an exquisite statue of the Virgin Mother, who looked down on all who entered with soothing painted eyes. Mairona had been praying in front of the statue for nearly half an hour.

She had always known she would never marry for a great love. Druimfada was at stake, and its needs had to come first. So she had bided her time, rejected dozens of suitors, and waited for a man who would at the very least let her govern by his side, as an equal. Of course she hoped there may be respect between them, and with luck friendship, but they were secondary. Occasionally she mused about a passionate pairing such as the bards and troubadours sang, but she wouldn't let herself dream about it happening to her. Love would never come into play when she chose a husband, because her duty must come first. Now circumstances were dictating that she choose sooner rather than later, and she was far from ready.

At least the king has sworn she would not be compelled to make a match that she found distasteful. Perhaps if she took the initiative to select someone, the king would be amenable and heed her wishes? Who was unmarried and wealthy enough to discount Druimfada to her guidance?

There was the king himself... no. The crown of queen consort would bind her to untold duties in Rhemuth, and kings in general were accustomed to being obeyed without question. One of his cousins? She had not met either of the princes yet, but Rory should be about her age, and he was heir to the duchy of Carthmoor when Prince Nigel died. The problem was in being heir. Prince Nigel looked to be at the peak of health, and while Mairona waited, Rory would have nothing better to do than learn statecraft at Druimfada. Out of the question.

Then there was the king... God, no. She shivered, and wasn't sure if it was from her thoughts or the damp chill. Her cloak had been covered in snowfall, and it was now melting and making the leather lining damp. There was nothing to be done about it, since she was not leaving for warmer quarters until her thoughts were sorted out.

The Duke of Cassan, perhaps? Dhugal MacArdry McLain was promising, and his face was open and pleasant during her initial audience with the king. She would have to become better acquainted with his character. Now, who else?

The king... why did he keep creeping in her thoughts? *Lord Jesus, guide my hand. Show me what Your will is.* Moving on—The Duke of Corwyn had a stepson who was already an earl. He was too young for marriage, but perhaps one could be contracted now for when he reached the age of consent. That could work very well. She could remain unmarried for a few more years, and his youth would put her in a stronger position to keep Druimfada for herself. The Duke and Duchess of Corwyn were at court, so the boy was likely in Rhemuth. She would have Seánin find out, and arrange a "chance" meeting. What was the lad's name—Bran, or something similar. What would the king think? The king again. Why did it always return to the Haldane?

"My lady?"

Mairona started at the intrusion, whirling to her feet to face an older priest with a kindly smile. He had a robe or like item folded over his arm. "Yes, Father? I hope I am not intruding."

"No, no, child. One who seeks the Lord God never intrudes in His church. Your mantle is wet from melting snow, and I feared you would take a chill. I bring you one that is dry and warm."

"Thank you, Father," she beamed in gratitude, releasing her cloak clasp. She caught the fur-lined leather easily and spread it neatly on the floor. Only then did she take the soft woolen mantle that the priest offered, and fastened it about her shoulders.

"What is your name, child?" the priest asked.

"Mairona, Father."

"Mairona. I am Father Thomas. You are new to court, are you not?"

"Aye," she murmured. "Do you know all about the castle, that you may recognize a newcomer?"

"Not as well as I would like," he chuckled. "St. Hilary's is not my church. I belong to All Saints, the cathedral within the city."

"I should like to see it," Mairona commented politely.

"You will in time, I am certain. Your face tells me that something is troubling you. Do you wish to share it with an old priest?" His eyes were warm and inviting, like she imagined the Virgin Mother to be.

"Thank you, Father. My problem is that I have to marry."

"Who is the husband chosen for you?"

"No one is chosen yet," Mairona sighed, "but I have been told that I have to marry. I am an heiress."

A mysterious expression rippled across the old priest's face. "Who tells you this?"

"The king," she said dully.

"I see." Understanding washed over his features. "Why does marriage trouble you?"

Chuckling without mirth, Mairona pulled her borrowed mantle close. "The king asked me the same question. My lands are isolated in the mountains, and my people are fiercely proud. I have kept them prosperous, and I fear that a husband will not care for my holdings as I do. I wish to hold on to what is mine."

"Child." The priest smiled like a loving father, like her father had before he died. "You are so proud of what you have and so desirous to keep it close that you risk overlooking what the Christ has intended for you." She looked both stricken at his reference to one of the seven deadly sins and eager for him to continue. "God intends marriage to bring happiness, but you must keep your heart open. It is possible that your husband will care for your people as much as you do."

"And I will have little or no say," Mairona blurted, instantly repentant. "Forgive me, Father. That was self-serving."

"Aye," he agreed. "It was. If you insist on staring so closely at what you stand to lose, you may miss the possibility of a greater role that the Christ may have in store for you. Keep your heart open to Him, and to what He offers. Now I must return to my duties at the cathedral. Think upon what I have said, and seek guidance in our Lord."

"Thank you." she ducked her head, steeling herself with a deep breath. "Father Thomas, will you give me your blessing?"

"Of course, child."

As he made the sign of the cross over her, tears flirted on her lashes. When he had gone, she knelt again in front of the Virgin to seek solace.

Holy Mother, pray for me.
Holy Mother, guide me.
Holy Mother, give me strength.
Holy Mother, give me peace...

The litany calmed her mind and stilled her breathing.

Holy Mother, show me what your Son wishes for me.
Holy Mother, guide me.

She looked up at the comforting face of the Virgin, who smiled down on her. The Lady's features were carved in a way that seemed familiar, especially in the warmth of her eyes. The king. She had seen a similar warmth in the king's eyes on the wall walk.

Back to the king. Again. Something had happened between them yesterday. Why else would she have been so honest and open with a man whom she expected to kill her on sight? Why would he have trusted her with his pain over the loss of his brief wife Sidana, when he should by rights shut her away as quickly and quietly as possible? Instead, he had laughed heartily at her jest and spoken to her as a man and not a king.

You have spirit and wit, my lady. I like that.

His words came unbidden, as did the approval in his eyes as he spoke them. They were not the words of a man who expected a wife to quietly spend her days stitching gowns in a solar. She would just have to see how events transpired. If she could not defy him, she could use circumstances to her own advantage.

Father. I am certainly your daughter, as you made me. I will make you proud.