

✘ Chapter 4 ✘

Late that afternoon, the great hall at Rhemuth was a flurry of activity immediately before the feast began. Few who were at court didn't attend, for the new Mearan Pretender Queen would be here. How would the king receive her? Present her? And so crowds of people had gathered in the smoky, torchlit hall to pay close attention to their king and his treatment of the newly arrived maiden who was called "queen."

Kelson was very aware of how frightened that girl had been in the gardens. He liked what he had seen when she opened to him for a short time on the wall, and surprisingly he had opened to her. It was a fleeting moment, though, ripped away in a gust of winter bluster. There was no telling what she really thought of him, and she had just been forced out of her home by fear of God knows what fate that was worse than death. He hoped tonight would continue working towards putting her at ease, and so intended to put his crown aside as much as possible. The usual, formal procession of the king was dispensed with, and he entered as unobtrusively as he could manage with Dhugal at his side. As he passed through the crowded space, nearby courtiers moved frantically in bright, flowing colors to bow or curtsy to their king. Kelson favored them with a nod or a smile, but the greater part of his attention was looking for his new guest. "Where is she?" he whispered to Dhugal after he scanned the room unsuccessfully.

"I dunno, Kel. Maybe she is being courted by one of your lords in a dark corner."

Kelson nearly floored Dhugal with an evil look.

"S'Blood, it was only in jest."

Leave it to Dhugal to get at the heart of the matter. He saw right through Kelson's supposed generic sympathies for a lonely girl, and played on his growing personal interest. The king's face warmed to a grin. "Sorry, Brother. I suppose I am touchy tonight."

"Touched by a certain fair lady, perhaps?" Dhugal had finally spotted Mairona, and gestured toward her. Kelson followed the direction of Dhugal's motion and found her.

He stopped short when he saw her, laughing, across the hall. Her hair was drawn back in a few tiny braids tamed by a thin circlet, then it tumbled freely in thick curls down her back. The heavy, featureless winter garb he had seen her in earlier had been exchanged for embroidered green silk, gathered around her waist by a silver belt laced with emeralds. A richly decorated mantle with dark fur trim was clasped at her throat by a brooch studded with more emeralds that shone on her white neck. The silk and gemstones matched the color he remembered in her eyes.

Then he saw the men surrounding her. They were younger sons, mostly. Titled men seemed to have stayed clear, wary of her dubious status as Queen of Meara. The younger sons had little to lose, however, and had to marry into lands anyway. She knew she would have to marry, and must be acquainting herself with her prospects. Did any of them find favor with her? Dhugal picked up on Kelson's weakening confidence.

"You are their king, Kel. What are they worth compared to you?" Dhugal rested his hand reassuringly on his blood brother's shoulder. "Marry, I have never seen you like this. You are as nervous as a green page boy."

"Does it show?" the king blurted.

"Only to one who knows you as I do. Go on. If you want her to share your table, you had better pluck her away from those lordlings." Dhugal gave Kelson a playful shove in her direction.

Mairona noticed the royal presence then, turning away from her tiring conversation to the approaching king. Lowering her eyes demurely in proper courtly respect, she curtsied and stayed low until he reached her. The hall grew quiet as people stopped to watch.

"Lady Mairona, please rise," he bade her, gently taking her hand. She started at his touch, looking up, then allowed him to help her stand. "Come, share the high table with your king."

"As my king wishes," she replied evenly. When he took her arm it was a tender touch, one she had felt from many men come courting. Unfortunately, this was one man she could not brush off with impunity, the one man she could not refuse at all. *I will turn this to my advantage.* Now that she was more certain of her ground, let the king see just what manner of maid she was.

He led her to the high table on the dais and saw her seated at his left as he took to his high-backed chair. People started moving to other tables, filling the hall with noise again. Mairona noted Dhugal on the king's right. He was the one who had forsworn himself to his very own aunt, the sometime Queen Cairin Quinnell, and had captured Sidana during his flight from Meara to Rhemuth. Duncan McLain, the Deryni bishop and Dhugal's father, was at his son's side. The infamous Deryni sorcerer Morgan and his wife sat at her left. The stories she had heard about the Duke of Corwyn were enough to make anyone's blood run cold, but being Deryni herself she knew better than most how those stories could be greatly exaggerated. Mairona saw her servingwoman Saraid at a table further down the hall. Rather than staying with her comrades from Druimfada, she was mingling with some of the lesser ladies of the court. That was good, for she could be trusted to get valuable information about the king and his circle. Her bodyguard Seánin was socializing nearby, keeping Mairona clearly in his sightlines while he conversed with Gwyneddi men. Satisfied, Mairona turned her attention back to Kelson, who pounded on the table for silence. His voice rang clearly through the hall.

"We wish to welcome the Lady Mairona of Druimfada to our court. She has made a long, difficult journey through winter storms to demonstrate loyalty to us, and we command everyone to feast in her honor." People throughout the hall pounded the tables to show their approval now that it was sanctioned by their king. When their enthusiasm waned, Kelson looked up at the musicians' gallery. "We would have song," he ordered. The instrumentalists broke out in an unobtrusive background tune. Kelson sat down next to Mairona, favoring her with a smile.

"How does this evening find my lady?" he asked.

"Very well, my lord. You have been most kind to me," she replied with a skillful demure smile. A squire leaned over the table to fill their goblets.

"I see you have been received well by some of my lords' sons," he commented curtly.

"They were trying to become acquainted with my land. That is all they want, and they may go on wanting," she replied bluntly, eyeing some of them down the hall with thinly veiled aversion. "Forgive my harsh words, your Highness. I forget the high company I am in. There have been more suitors than I could ever hope to count visiting Druimfada since my father died. Each one is like the other. 'Tis the land they want; and I am little more than a necessary part of the bargain. It has only gotten worse since I was proclaimed this new Pretender Queen."

The king took up his goblet to drink, wondering at how she had overcome yesterday's timidity. "I understand," he almost whispered, sending a tentative tendril of thought in her direction. This time she didn't turn him away as thoroughly as she had during her initial reception at court.

"You do?" she wondered at him, some of her calculated resolve slipping. It quickly returned. "Of course. Every eligible lady in the Eleven Kingdoms desires to be the Queen of Gwynedd. The handsome young unwed Haldane king is the talk of every lady's solar." Mairona picked up her own

goblet to taste the wine. It was very good, a Fianna vintage, but it left an aftertaste as sour as the conversation topic.

"You speak frankly, my lady," he grinned.

"I was my father's only child, Highness. He was perhaps too indulgent with me."

"I think not. I—" Kelson found himself suddenly searching for words under the gaze of her crystal green eyes, so he took a deep draught from his goblet. Mairona did likewise, following his lead. This time the taste was more pleasant. She noted that he was conversing in mind-speech, probably with Dhugal, so she turned her eyes down the hall to seek out Saraid.

She had a close psychic bond with her servingwoman, and conversing silently was usually not a problem, but the handmaid had difficulty at this distance.

Saraid? Mairona tried tentatively, letting her lids drop halfway over her eyes as they unfocused. *Saraid, can you hear me?*

The woman turned toward her lady at the high table. She was trying to communicate back, but she wasn't trained well enough to do it at that distance. Instead, she moved her hand in a questioning gesture, showing that she was at least receiving a little.

'Tis fine, Saraid. Have you learned about the king? Mairona focused her eyes now that she had established at least a small connection. Saraid nodded in reply. *Well?* Mairona asked. Saraid nodded her approval. Mairona turned her attention to her bodyguard and advisor. *Seánin?*

He was more skillful. *My lady?*

What of the king?

Seánin nodded his approval. *He is beloved of his people, who are fiercely loyal. He is a man of his word. I believe you may trust him.*

Sighing, Mairona digested these findings. The king was an honorable man at least, and that was disappointing in a way. She could not play games with a principled man without some qualms of conscience.

Meanwhile, Kelson was carrying on his own conversation with Dhugal.

What do I say now? he asked his redheaded blood brother.

You are the king. You will think of something, the younger duke chuckled.

Dhugal, do not play with me. You have more experience in this sort of thing, Kelson returned.

And you can see how that experience plays tonight, he replied, referring to his shocking lack of female company.

Dhugal! the king shot back.

Oh, I do not know. Tell her she is beautiful. 'Tis hard to go wrong with that. Dhugal had to bury his face in his goblet to keep from laughing out loud. *I have a feeling it will come from your lips with such a sincerity that you could warm the snowy peaks of Rhelljan. You had better do it now, too. You have lost her attention to some Deryni trick—mind-speech perhaps, like us? What is she doing?*

I do not know, the king returned, turning toward her. He watched her sigh as she returned to full awareness.

"My lady Mairona, that seemed a strenuous exercise," he observed cautiously.

"Forgive me, my lord. I was having some words with my woman Saraid down yonder." She motioned with her chin toward her attendant's direction.

"Where?" the king asked, frowning as he took some wine. He didn't see anybody he recognized as being in Mairona's service near enough for casual mind-speech.

"Yonder, in the pink woolen gown," she motioned again. Kelson almost choked on his wine.

"You are both trained well enough to communicate at that distance?"

"I am, Sire. 'Tis difficult, but I can get my idea across. She has trouble returning with mind-speech, so she gestures."

"I had not realized that Deryni teachers were so easy to come by in Meara. I would like to learn about your training," Kelson commented. Squires, pages, and servants started to enter with the first course of food.

"As you wish, my lord," she answered politely.

The king grew silent again. His experience with courting women consisted of a murdered bride and a beloved princess who chose the convent over him. This seemed to be going little better. Dhugal sent a thought, elbowing him lightly. The king glanced over, and Dhugal started laughing at his uneasiness. Mairona looked questioningly at the two of them as squires bent over the table to place roast venison on the king's golden plate.

"Forgive my blood brother, my lady," Dhugal told her across Kelson. "He is not skilled with such lovely lasses as yourself and—" He was cut off by Kelson's particularly well-placed elbow and a truly withering stare, but that didn't stop him. "He has little practice trying to win a lady." Another elbow in the ribs. Dhugal grinned wryly. "I was merely trying to give him advice and encouragement." He visibly winced as the king's heel connected with his shin. Kelson looked as if he could crawl into a hole.

"Indeed?" Mairona raised an eyebrow, finding herself amused. The fact that Kelson allowed his border duke to tease him spoke well of the king in her eyes. Her feelings warmed somewhat to both men, for she heartily enjoyed Dhugal's wit and the king's near-shy uncertainty was a pleasant change from smooth-talking suitors out for her estates. "What did my lord Duke advise, Sire?"

Kelson covered his eyes with his hand, thinking murderous thoughts about his brother. Of all the damndest stunts Dhugal could have pulled! He could hear Morgan and his wife Richenda laughing beyond Mairona, making matters worse.

"Oh, come, Sire," Mairona continued with a smile. "Surely his advice could not have been that poor. What did he say?"

"He said to tell you that you are beautiful," the king murmured through his hand.

"Really?" Mairona returned, an edge of contempt creeping in her voice. "I have had many men tell me I am beautiful, my lord, to no avail. When they praise my beauty, they are thinking only that my land is desirable. I can read them all too well, being Deryni."

Kelson removed his hand and finally found his tongue. "What use have I for land that you hold only at my will and pleasure, my lady? I do not have to win you in order to benefit from its

wealth." She stiffened, forcing down tears as she turned away in anguish. *Khadasa*, of all the stupid things to say! He paused to start cutting the meat for the two of them, but he dropped his dagger when he thought of a possible way to redeem his outburst. "And when I say you are beautiful, it is because your eyes could ensnare my soul—" He cut off, not willing to say more in such a public setting. "Has any man told you that, Mairona?"

"Not in such earnest, your Highness," she whispered, looking down at the table. The sincerity of his words caught her off guard, the previous mood of humor and confidence dispelled. She had made a grave error, perhaps an irreparable one. What a perfect way to present herself to the king, who held her very future in his hands! He offered her some meat in silence, and she wordlessly accepted, her spirits falling. Kelson grew frustrated with her growing distance and his new inability to speak. He had been well-trained to always know exactly what to say, and that instruction had never failed him before now.

This is becoming a disaster, he thought to himself privately. But his shields had slipped, and Mairona heard. It wasn't a comment on state matters, but of personal wishes and dreams he had spent a good portion of his life hiding for duty's sake. Just like her. He dared more than she allowed herself, dared dream of a marriage of affection. A rush of warmth washed over her at the king's bare vulnerability, an exposure that she knew only a handful of people had witnessed. She didn't completely understand her reaction, for it was new. It was not pity, and it was a far cry from the condescension she had felt for other men trying to court her, but rather was borne of the bond that had formed high on the wall walk. King Kelson was different from her former suitors, that was now unquestionable. Her conscience would no longer allow her to play games with this man. On reflection, perhaps a long-term residence in Rhemuth would not be so objectionable after all. There must be a transfer portal here she could use to visit Druimfada as often as she liked, once Rolf had been evicted. This could work. With that realization, she made a daring decision that shocked even her.

"Your Highness?" she called.

"Aye?" he answered, turning to her.

By custom, he should ask for the right she was going to volunteer, but she couldn't think of how else to salvage the night. Without speaking, Mairona picked up his goblet and took a deep draught. She then offered it to the king. He recognized it as a border ritual he had seen at Transha during one of his numerous visits, and assumed that the Mearans must have a similar practice. It was an action allowing a suitor to court, a sort of initial acceptance and invitation for continued pursuit. Kelson carefully placed his hands over hers, taking a moment to feel the warmth and smoothness of her fingers that trembled ever so slightly, then tipped the wine to his lips, drinking long and slow. He lowered the cup, keeping his hands over hers, and beamed at her over its rim. She smiled back with unexpected lightness, opening her surface shields to his tentative touch. They both blushed when Dhugal, Duncan, Morgan and Richenda all started applauding.

"I told you it would work," Dhugal joked, clapping Kelson on the back.

"No thanks to you. I will have some words with you later," the king warned, playfully taking his brother by a fistful of tunic.

"Be merciful with him, my lord," Mairona lightheartedly pleaded on Dhugal's behalf. "His intentions were certainly noble."

"If you desire it, my lady," Kelson smiled, releasing Dhugal. He signaled a page to refill his goblet before rising to his feet. The hall fell silent as all attention turned to him. "To hail a most noble lady, we ask that Thomas, the royal bard, come forward to sing in her honor." The men and woman in the hall cheered and raised their goblets to Mairona, who smiled to herself as she nodded to the old bard.

Kelson sat as Thomas came forward, carrying his harp. The bard bowed and greeted king and court, then sat making some minor adjustments to the tuning of the gut strings before he started playing. The king leaned toward his deliciously fascinating guest. "Even my people cheer at your name, Mairona," he said softly.

"Nay, my lord. They cheer for their king," she replied.

"And the king cheers for you. Hail, Mairona, Queen of Beauty." He raised his goblet to her.

"My lord!" she protested, her fair skin turning a rosy pink. "I am not worthy of such high praise."

Kelson felt a tremendous urge to kiss her, but he turned away. "You are worthy of much more than my poor words could convey," he told her instead, offering her a block of cheese impaled on the tip of his dagger. She dislodged it from the blade and took a delicate bite.

"Then your words must be poor indeed, for all my worthiness," she returned, trying to lighten the serious mood. Dhugal laughed loudly.

"I believe she would be a match for even my wit, Kelson," he remarked. "Well said, my lady. I believe you have our king at a loss yet again."

"Do not insult the lady so, Dhugal," the king returned with a sly grin. "A blind old dog could equal your wit, dear brother."

"It appears that the king isn't at a loss after all, my lord Duke," Mairona laughed, truly enjoying herself. This was the first time she had felt this safe and carefree since— No. She wouldn't think about it now.

"Alas, I do not have your power to bedazzle my lord king," Dhugal jested, feigning disappointment.

"My lady," Kelson began, pointedly turning his back toward his blood brother. "Would you care to dance? We may escape the dull humor of my court jester."

"Jester?!" Dhugal exploded. "Are you calling me a jester?!"

"Aye, Sire," Mairona giggled, taking his proffered hand. "We shall see if the duke's merry mood can catch him a partner."

"Thomas, play us a lively dancing tune," the king commanded.

"Gladly, your Majesty," the old bard replied, grinning. Without pausing, he changed from the lay he had been singing to a spirited tune, pleased to see the king eager to start the dancing for a change. Other men and women followed Kelson to the space between the tables, including Morgan and Richenda.

Mairona withdrew her hand as she took her place in the ladies' line opposite Kelson and the other lords. She curtsied to his bow, and then they came together again with a swelling of music. Kelson watched her very closely, soaking up every detail of how her circlet shone in the firelight, how her hair moved behind her, and how her eyes flashed as she circled around him. She was very aware of his scrutiny, and found to her astonishment that it pleased her. The look in his eye and the touch of his hand sent shivers down her spine. The effect she was having on him was something new, something finally genuine. And oh, what he was doing to her! She smiled broadly at him, letting her golden aura shine around her head. He answered with a flare of crimson light.

For Kelson, the hall was far distant. His reality was the flying music, and Mairona whirling

around him, golden light glowing around her. At times he almost missed a step because of the spell she was weaving around him that had nothing at all to do with her Deryni talents. He knew he had been staring too intently, too long, to be polite. A small warning nagged at the back of his head. Until yesterday she had been thought a traitor, an annoyance to be dealt with, and now he found himself wanting to trust her too quickly. Yet, he couldn't deny the growing ties between them any more than he could look away. Besides, he could almost physically feel her looking back, with a similar look of awe, though she certainly carried herself with more surety than he did. Then he realized the near-physical touch was really their minds brushing, and he pulled back in surprise. When he raised his shields suddenly, she did likewise, uncertain of the king's reaction. Silently berating himself, he ventured to her tentatively, this time at a conscious level. She met him psychically, enjoying the delicate brush of his mind on hers. The end of the dance crept up on them all too soon, and he took her hand as he bowed and she curtsied. She rose, looking up at him with scintillating eyes. Without breaking away from her entrancing gaze, he raised her hand to his lips briefly. Mairona caught her breath, flushed, then fanned herself with her other hand.

"It grows warm in here," she breathed. Kelson led Mairona off the floor and back to the high table, watching her fiddle with the brooch fastening her mantle.

"That clasp. 'Tis your father's emblem, is it not it?" he asked.

"Aye. Well, 'tis mine now that he is gone," she reminded him. "The invincible fortress on the rock, *caisleán* in the old tongue." She finally undid the brooch, dropping the cloak into the chair she was seated in.

"Is the *caisleán* truly invulnerable?" he asked her, referring only to her heart. He wasn't aware of other possible meanings his choice of words might convey. She picked up on it, though, and assumed he had also.

"According to legend," she replied flirtatiously. "However, a man who conducts himself with suitable honor could find himself in the favor of the *caisleán's* lady. She might willingly raise the gate, and let the suitor in."

Kelson drew in a breath, feeling a burning tightness at the suggestiveness of her reply. He had asked for it, however unwittingly. "You are a bold one. And what would the lady consider honorable conduct?"

"Something that would do credit to the maid and her suitor," she replied seriously.

"My intentions are entirely honorable, my lady. They have never been any less," he assured her, taking her hand.

"That is well, my lord. Shall we see where they lead us?"

He nodded, almost holding his breath. She turned away partially to stifle a yawn, not exactly the reaction he had been hoping for.

"You are weary, my lady? Forgive me. You have traveled far in this harsh weather, of course you are yet fatigued. Would you like to retire?"

"If it would not offend, Sire." She sent a command to Saraid, who was conversing near the dais, motioning her to come. She also flashed a hand signal to Seánin, bidding him remain in the hall. He raised an eyebrow in displeasure, but obeyed his mistress.

"'Tis no offense. Do you care for a royal escort?" He held out his arm.

"Aye, my lord," she responded, giving the discarded mantle to Saraid and placing her arm in the king's. He led her through a door behind the dais, Saraid following just a few paces behind.

Mairona's other servants remained at the feast, and would probably bed down there for the night when the revelry was over.

It was a short walk up the spiraling stair to her room. When they reached her door, Kelson glanced back at her attendant. Mairona nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Saraid, go on in. I will follow shortly," she told her maid.

"Yes, my lady. Your Highness." Saraid curtsied to the king, then disappeared through the door, a model of discretion. Once they were alone, Kelson took both of Mairona's hands.

"I am afraid that tomorrow duty must finally reign, my lady. You must tell me about the Mearan treachery," he said.

"I understand, and am prepared to share all I know." She looked into his eyes. He smiled at her.

"I know, there is no doubt. However, I would wish that tonight will sweeten the task we must do in the morn."

"It has, my lord, more than I had hoped." She returned his smile, looking up through her lashes.

"Then allow me to sweeten the night even more before we must part." He released one of her hands to brush against her hair, then the velvety softness of her cheek. Her breathing had quickened pleasantly when he finally cupped her face and leaned forward to touch her lips with his. It was the first time she had allowed herself to be kissed by anyone, and a part of her couldn't believe she was permitting this to happen. It was a sweet, passionate kiss that left her heart fluttering and his pounding. They both stumbled back, surprised.

"The drink in Rhemuth is exceedingly strong," Mairona breathed, unsure of the agreeable longing he had awoken in her.

"Not as strong as Mearan wine, my lady," he replied.

"You flatter me, my lord," she smiled fetchingly.

"Tis not empty flattery, I assure you. Pleasant dreaming, sweet lady."

"And to you, my lord king."

He brushed her cheek lightly, sending a caressing thought, before she turned and vanished through the door. He pivoted on his heel and walked back down to the hall, whistling to himself.

Mairona slipped into her chambers and shut the door behind her, then leaned on it a moment. "What did you find about the king?" she asked Saraid, not bothering to look up.

"Does it matter?" the serving woman called back, neatly folding up the mantle.

"Yes, it matters! What did you hear?" Mairona pushed herself away from the door and made her way to the bedchamber. Saraid followed closely as she replied.

"His conduct is exemplary. There aren't even any rumors of bastards by castle servants. The king has only courted twice. The first time was his marriage to the Princess Sidana." Saraid started turning the bed down.

"I know very well how that ended," Mairona grimaced, recalling Kelson's grief when he spoke

of a bride murdered moments after they had exchanged vows. "What of the second?"

"She was a princess from an eastern desert kingdom, a cousin of the Duchess of Corwyn. To all appearances he courted her honorably," Saraid said.

"And then?" Mairona unfastened the belt gathering her dress.

"When the king was rumored dead two years ago, she married Prince Nigel's traitor son Conall. After his execution, she took holy vows." Saraid moved quickly to take the belt from her mistress.

"I see." Mairona froze, deep in thought for a moment, then she dropped down on the bed. "If that is the case, he is courting me with intentions of marriage," she said with amazement in her voice.

"What do you want?" Saraid asked, sitting next to her mistress.

"Tis all happening so fast. We just arrived yesterday, fleeing for my safety. I do not know what to think or want. He kissed me, Saraid, outside the door. I *let* him kiss me. It felt so..." She fell backwards to lie on the bed, grinning ear to ear.

"It sounds like there is already affection between you," Saraid grinned back.

"So soon? I have only just met the man!" Mairona propped herself up on her elbows.

"Stranger things have happened, my lady. Especially when two Deryni are involved, or so I have been told." She helped Mairona up and tugged her gown over her head. "So. He may intend to marry you. What are your intentions?"

"I intend to see how he presses his suit, and tonight we shall leave it at that."