

❖ Chapter 5 ❖

The next morning Mairona attended Mass with the king's household in the keep's chapel. Kelson kneeled two rows ahead of her, and she found it difficult to pay attention to Bishop McLain's celebration rather than the king's black head bowed over clasped hands, hair pulled back in a border braid secured with crimson ribbon. She stifled a smile when she saw the ribbon had caught on the neck of his cloak, and was starting to pull out. These were not proper thoughts while worshipping the Lord God.

"Confiteor Deo omnipotenti, beatae Mariae semper Virgini, beato Michaeli Archangelo, beato Joanni Baptistae, sanctis Apostolis Petro et Paulo, omnibus Sanctis, et tibi pater," Duncan chanted. *"quia peccavi nimis cogitatione verbo, et opere."* I confess to Almighty God, to Blessed Mary ever Virgin, Blessed Michael the Archangel, Blessed John the Baptist, the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, to all the Saints, and to You, Father, that I have sinned exceedingly in thought, word, and deed. Even though she could recite the entire Mass backwards standing on her head, Mairona started to consciously translate the phrases word by word, forcing herself to pay attention. Her breath became regulated, slow and even, in, out, in, out. She had to do something, or later she wouldn't be in a proper state of reverence to take communion.

Meanwhile, Kelson was having like challenges. She couldn't be seen, but he could feel her strong psychic presence nearby. His mind struggled with the visions of clear green eyes that floated on the inside of his eyelids. Memories came unbidden of the previous night; of dancing in the hall, and, more disrupting, their kiss. *"Misereatur tui omnipotens Deus, et dimissis peccatis tuis, perducatur te ad vitam aeternam."* May Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive your sins, and bring you to everlasting life.

Lord, he prayed, raising his knuckles to his lips. *Help me empty my mind and prepare myself for Thy presence.* Even though it was a shorter daily mass, without the ritual processions and chants of Sunday's celebration, it was one of the longest he had ever attended. Finally communion was administered and the concluding dismissal prayers were said.

"Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus Pater, et Filius, et Spiritus Sanctus." May Almighty God bless you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

"Amen," Kelson and Mairona breathed heartily in reply. When Duncan had concluded, they both rose. Mairona stretched as inconspicuously as she could, stiff and sore after kneeling for so long. She adjusted her veil about her shoulders as she turned to Saraid.

"I thought I would never get through that," she murmured.

"You did seem restless, my lady. And I believe the source of that restlessness is approaching." Saraid unobtrusively moved away.

Mairona turned around to see that the king was indeed walking her way. "My lord," she greeted, dipping in a quick yet fluid curtsy.

"Good morrow, Mairona. I wish you to break your fast with my advisors in my chambers, where we may discuss Meara." He brushed her mind gently, taking away the formality of his words.

"I would like that, Sire," she smiled apprehensively in return. She must tell him all she knew, it was her duty, and yet she couldn't shake the feeling that somehow this was wrong, that she was betraying her people. They were traitors to the lawful crown, she knew, and she would particularly enjoy exposing Rolf to the king's justice, but the others were mostly overzealous Mearan patriot chieftains. She felt a strange kinship with them, by virtue of their shared blood.

What is the matter? Kelson sent, worried at her distance. Perhaps she had regrets over the feast, or its aftermath?

Nothing of import, she returned, shaking her head minutely. *This shall not be as enjoyable as last night.*

I know, Kelson sighed. He mentally sent commands to Dhugal, Duncan, and Morgan to precede him to his rooms, then hand-signaled Prince Nigel to do the same.

"May Saraid accompany me?" Mairona asked aloud.

Kelson hesitated. Saraid was out of the question at such a sensitive discussion, yet he understood Mairona's wish to have another lady present. "The Duchess of Corwyn will attend. Is that suitable?"

"Aye," she nodded, motioning her maid closer. "Saraid, I will accompany his Highness. Return to my chambers."

"Yes, my lady," she said, her eye twinkling at the sight of her mistress with the king. "Your Highness," she curtsied, then left the chapel. Kelson waited for the rest of the morning Mass' attendants to depart before continuing.

"Now, Mairona, there is no one to hear. What is wrong?" He took one of her hands in his. She had no choice but to be honest. It was a drawback of being in the presence of a Deryni.

"That is a difficult question, my lord. I feel a strong kinship with my fellow Mearans, and a sense of loyalty to them. My loyalty to you is stronger, yet—" She bit her lip, unsure of how to speak her thoughts without insult.

"You feel like you are betraying your people?" he asked, idly caressing the back of her hand with his thumb. She nodded miserably, lowering her head. "You are not betraying the Mearans, Mairona. Rather, you are bringing traitors to justice."

"Some of them truly deserve it," she replied, unable to look at his face. "But the lesser chieftains they have collected as support are different. Most of them are good men, caught up in tales of glorious Old Meara. Their loyalties are misguided, for they think they are only serving their Crown. They are looking to the wrong crown—"

"You know some of them well?" Kelson guessed.

"A few of them were fostered at my father's court. One of them was my father's ward, Fergal Ó Hearne. He is like a brother to me, and believes he is acting for my interests." She looked at him with pleading eyes that stabbed at his heart. He wanted very much to tell her it would turn out all right, but he would not give her false hope.

"Mairona, I wish I could promise you that I can save them. However difficult it may be, Gwynedd's welfare must come before my personal concerns. Do you understand that?" He squeezed her hand lightly.

"Aye, your Highness. Very well," she said quietly.

"I can vow that the king's justice will be tempered with mercy. If it is possible without compromising my duty, I shall save this man," he promised. "Perhaps you could write letters convincing him to break faith with the traitors and swear fealty to me. Any man who does that and swears true will receive a full pardon."

"I shall do that, my lord. Thank you." She brought her free hand up and placed it on his, favoring him with a brief smile.

"I know this is not easy for you," he said gently, gray eyes mirroring her distress.
"No," she shook her head. "But your kindness has helped."

He smiled and leaned over to kiss her. It was barely more than a brief brushing of lips, very different from the one that they had shared the previous night, but it gave her comfort. That gladdened him.

"Are you ready?" he asked, gesturing toward the door.

"Aye," she nodded, allowing him to lead her to his chambers off the solar.

A fire had already been started and food brought to the room Kelson utilized for the meeting. It was of a good size, with a large table on one side and a more informal sitting area with a smaller table before the fireplace. The furnishing was more extensive than Mairona was accustomed to. She noted with some surprise that none of the men nor Richenda rose or bowed to the king when they greeted him. He seemed to prefer a casual atmosphere in private, which was fine with her. That was how things were at Druimfada, by her choice and her father's before her. Dhugal offered a bowl of food, but Kelson shook his head and seated Mairona close to the fire. He saw her glance around the room, at the people, her outward calm too forced. Placing his hand on her shoulder, he sent mental reassurance. He wished there were something he could do to soothe her.

"I believe you already know everybody in the room. You met Alaric Morgan yesterday," he started, trying to ease her into the business ahead. Mairona smiled.

"My lord Duke," she nodded. "I have been a little disappointed. The legendary fearful Deryni sorcerer in black doesn't strike nearly as much terror when dressed in green, as you are this morning." She held her breath, waiting for his response. The atmosphere was very casual in here, but as a newcomer this was a huge risk. Morgan laughed, and she thankfully let out a sigh.

"I see my reputation goes as far as the Mearan mountains, but news travels slowly," he chuckled. "The badgering of no less than Archbishop Cardiel, my wardrober, and my lady wife put an end to my darkling phase several years ago. 'Tis something for you to look forward to, Kelson, when you do marry," Morgan said pointedly at the king, who humored his Champion with a wry grin.

"At least I did not need the Archbishop pestering me to stop wearing black," Kelson returned. Mairona wondered if he referred to his mourning clothes after Sidana died. "My apologies, Richenda. We do not mean to overlook you."

"No apologies necessary," she said, her blue eyes twinkling with a smile. "I am certain Lady Mairona and I will have plenty of time to become acquainted in the solar."

"I look forward to it, my lady Duchess," Mairona replied, returning the smile. Kelson continued with the introductions.

"Father Duncan and his son Dhugal were also present last night."

"Aye, we met words in the hall, didn't we my lady?" Dhugal asked, bowing to her.
"I trust we shall have the chance to do so again," she playfully dared him.

"You have not formally met my uncle, have you?" the king continued. "This is Prince Nigel. Uncle, this is the Lady Mairona ní Dhugain."

Nigel bowed. "I was unable to welcome you to Rhemuth upon your arrival yesterday morning, so I shall do so now," he said.

"I thank your Highness," she replied, nodding her head.

"Well, shall we break our fast before we start?" the king said, trying to give Mairona time to get more comfortable. She had put on a convincing air of confidence, but she was largely silent as she ate mostly dried fruit and a slice of bread with cheese. Kelson noticed gladly that her composure had strengthened, though he sensed that her inner turmoil hadn't lessened. As the meal wound to a close, he could delay no longer.

"Alright, let us begin," he started. "Mairona, I know Rolf of Tirkeeve is leading this uprising in your name."

"Aye, he is," Mairona spat. Kelson was taken aback at the intense hatred that flashed in her eyes when he mentioned Rolf's name.

"I need to know what he is planning and where he is getting his support," the king said.

"Would this not be a whole lot easier and more thorough if you Read me?" she asked.

"Yes, it would. I am not used to such open acceptance of our methods," Kelson said, which was true. But the real reason he shied away from that was he was reluctant to have their first experience with rapport, a potentially intimate sharing, with an audience. It could turn very personal, and he wasn't sure he was ready to share his unmasked feelings with Mairona yet, and he had no desire to do so in front of even his inner circle. She was right, though. It would definitely be more thorough. He stood up and moved behind her, placing his hands gently on her shoulders. "Alright. Just lean back on me and close—"

Before he could finish, she had established the rapport. *I have done this before*, she chastised him, amused at his surprise. Her touch was very smooth, betraying her extensive training.

My apologies. It is not often that I meet a Deryni who has been taught so well. Kelson took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, sinking to a deeper level. She descended with him effortlessly. *Now*, he continued, *show me what I need to know before I get distracted by more personal pursuits.*

She willing gave him all she knew about the Mearan plot, and thankfully no lords of real power backed Rolf. Kelson reviewed the names and identities of all the chieftains and minor lords who threw their support behind the Chief of Tirkeeve. Beyond that, she hadn't discovered much about their plans to make Meara independent once more. She did know that Rolf had been able to raise a force of about five hundred men through his backers and hired mercenaries. It wasn't large enough to be dangerous, and Kelson had never heard any tales told of Rolf's military genius, so that was no problem. Mairona hadn't openly supported the plot, so she had never been privy to details. There wasn't as much information as Kelson had hoped, but it was enough to assure him that suppressing the rebels wouldn't require the same kind of war he had fought three years ago. Satisfied, he moved on.

Now, what cause has Rolf of Tirkeeve given you to hate him so? he asked her. Her sharing instantly darkened with a smoldering fury held tightly under leash. Kelson received vivid images of how Rolf had been displeased when he found that his chosen Queen of Meara wasn't as biddable as he expected. How he had tried to beat her to submission, but failed as she skillfully avoided his blows. In response she had ordered her house guard to throw him out of her castle. He had brought too many supporters, though, for her small garrison to handle. He had broken into her bedchamber the following evening, demanding that she marry him. With a growing terror and struggling to hold

some shreds of dignity together, she refused. He threatened that if she hadn't changed her mind before the morrow, that he would give her honor no choice but to marry him.

There were no doubts in Mairona's mind that Rolf would carry out his threat and dare force her to bed first. She would rather die than be raped, especially by such filth. In the cover of night she gathered a handful of trusted servants and guards, hurriedly packed a couple chests of her favorite belongings and as much of the treasury as she could manage, then fled her castle for Rhemuth and the king.

Kelson felt the full impact of her fear, and her courage in defying Rolf to escape, watching carefully for pursuit those first days. He moved to embrace her, trying to envelop her in a circle of safety and strength. *Justice will be served, he promised her. Rolf will pay.*

Aye, he will, she replied with determination.

Wait... Kelson broke in, finding something intriguing. A portion of her mind was locked off behind powerful shields that were meant to escape casual detection. *What is this?*

Your abilities are quite good, my lord. It is the result of a lesson with my tutor, a safe place in my mind that no one may breach without injuring himself, she told him. *In fact, if someone penetrates my shields without my consent, it will unleash a nasty surprise.*

You must teach me how that sort of shield is constructed. I trust there is nothing behind it about Rolf or Mearan rebels, he said.

No, my lord. Mairona took the opportunity to turn the sharing more toward her arrival in Rhemuth, and the feast the night before. Kelson discovered that his was the first suit that she had even considered accepting, and shared his awe with her, all reservations to showing his feelings gone. She had been joyously surprised at someone courting her sincerely, not for the sake of her lands or her wealth. He showed her how her courage and spirit had won his attention when she had simply walked down his hall with head held high, daring to look him in the eye. *I was always a headstrong child,* she sent humorously.

They shared their individual memories and feelings from the night before. She had been able to give herself to almost reckless abandon, reveling in the freedom of escaping Rolf's clutches, the relief at a safe welcome in Rhemuth, and enjoyment of the way Kelson's interest made her feel. He showed her how he had felt as they kissed outside her door, and how he had walked away whistling the whole distance to the great hall. She laughed out loud when she recognized the tune from the music they had danced to previously, and he chuckled when she showed him how she had been grinning ear to ear when she told Saraid of the kiss. Unintentionally, she let slip Saraid's reaction to her words, when the maid said, "It sounds like there is already affection between you." And how Saraid had really voiced Mairona's private hopes.

Kelson was initially taken aback. A part of him hadn't dared accept what his heart hoped, that she might feel the same way about him as he did about her, even though the feast had gone very well. But here he had proof that she did return his feelings, despite her fears about what he might have to do to her homeland and more especially Fergal. That was royal duty, however, and she had effortlessly separated the King of Gwynedd from Kelson the man. He let his joy wash over her, joy at both the memories she had shared and at her innate understanding of what the crown demanded of him. It was a by-product of the strong obligation her father had instilled in her.

I did not mean to let that by so soon, she admitted with a tinge of embarrassment.

It gladdens me that you did, he returned, *because I know I could love you.*

Can this truly happen so quickly? she asked incredulously.

We are Deryni, he returned. *We need not play all the games humans must.*

Sometimes those games can be fun, she laughed, sending the image of Dhugal teasing him about his inexperience with courting, and Kelson hiding his face in his hand, wishing he could disappear under the table.

Well, um, Kelson mentally choked. *We should not keep everyone waiting.*

Oh, of course not, my lord, she ribbed him at his obvious change of subject, coming out of trance with him. During the course of the exchange his head had dropped down to rest on hers, and his arms wrapped her in a tight embrace. Her hands had risen to clasp his. Everyone had withdrawn to the windows to give Kelson and Mairona an illusion of privacy.

"Are you certain you were conferring about the Mearan situation?" Morgan quipped from across the room.

"I learned what I needed to know," Kelson replied, stepping away from Mairona, who blushed a delicate pink. Few could contain their grins, and Dhugal winked. "Mairona, if you wish you may return to your chamber or visit the solar. My lady Richenda, you should accompany her. We no longer need your assistance."

"Very well," Mairona smiled bashfully, then rose and curtsied. "My lords, your Highness." She departed, Richenda following closely. Kelson sat down again, waiting until they were gone to begin speaking. The others took chairs around him.

"Alright. The situation doesn't look that bad. Rolf doesn't have any strong backers, only some lesser chieftains to follow him and five hundred men. He had to hire quite a few mercenaries to fill out that number," Kelson said.

"Where is he now?" Nigel asked, leaning forward.

"At Druimfada, with those men. He was threatening to force Mairona into marriage, and that is why she left. I doubt he would have moved any men from Druimfada this time of year, with the winter we're having. I plan on hiring a few informers in Druimfada to keep an eye on him."

Morgan nodded in agreement. "How does Rolf intend to free Meara with only five hundred men?" he asked.

"She does not know," Kelson sighed, "and that has me worried. Mairona would not cooperate with him, so she learned little of his plans. I doubt he would be reckless enough to try to pull this off with brute military force. What is he up to?"

"Perhaps he was counting on Mairona backing him, and hoping she would pull in more supporters?" Dhugal suggested.

"Maybe," Kelson said. "But I would not depend on it. There is still time to figure him out. I cannot go marching any sizable army to Meara for another month, probably more, depending on the spring thaw. Much snow fell in the Cloome Mountains this winter, with more bound to come, and the spring flooding will be bad. I am hoping that by the time it is passable, we will know more. Unless anyone has any other ideas?" Nobody did. "Alright. The full council will be convening two days hence, when Ewan arrives from Claibourne. Before then, Morgan, I would like you to handpick a few men for this mission and send them to Druimfada. Uncle, will you start preparing summons to raise an army? I will decide how large it needs to be after meeting with the council. I think that is all."

"Not entirely," Morgan inserted, grinning. "Will we be preparing for a royal wedding as well as planning a campaign on Druimfada?"

Kelson beamed back. "I need a chance to ask the lady," he replied.

"Tis time you settle down, Kel," Dhugal bantered. "Courting pretty maidens is difficult when they are all staring dreamy-eyed at you. Now your loyal men will get a chance." Kelson snorted.

"As if you have ever had any problem getting lovely ladies in dark corners," the king returned, standing. "I need some air. If the roads are sufficiently clear, I think I will go for a ride. There is some time yet for personal pursuits before the day must begin in earnest."

"You will not be composing little love poems?" Dhugal shot, throwing an arm around the king's shoulders.

Kelson grinned at him. "I would not want to jeopardize my good standing with the Lady Mairona, now would I?"