

✘ Chapter 6 ✘

Richenda brought Mairona to the solar over the great hall so she could meet the women of the court. One of the younger girls caught Mairona's interest, for she had the look of Mearan ancestry despite her Gwyneddi name of Gwenhwyfar. The girl sat near a window to take advantage of the light, embroidering a tunic. Young Gwenhwyfar looked up shyly as the new, if unwilling, Mearan Pretender passed. "My lady," the girl said, rising to curtsy. Mairona favored her with a nod, then looked at her curiously.

"Have we met before?" Mairona asked, seeing something familiar in her features.

"Aye, my lady, when we were children," Gwenhwyfar replied. "My father was Gwydion of Tawer Shanakill. He used to bring me to Druimfada when I was very young."

"Of course!" Mairona exclaimed. "You have grown so, I did not recognize you! Your father was killed in the Mearan war, was he not?"

Gwenhwyfar bowed her head. "Aye, my lady. He died a traitor."

"I am sorry," Mairona whispered. "I did not know."

"My father was foolish," Gwenhwyfar shrugged. "He paid for his mistakes. My brother Artur is Lord of Tawer Shanakill now."

"How is Artur? I remember he used to torment us to no end!"

Mairona and Gwenhwyfar sat together, laughing at old memories and the antics between Artur and Mairona, each trying to outdo the other. Artur had tripped Mairona in front of all his friends, so she put a burr underneath his saddle the next day and saw him thrown from his horse. He cut off her hair when she was sleeping, so she used a subtle Deryni influence to make her favorite hound Cabal chase him, nipping at his heels. Artur had run, terrified, until he finally found safety in the branches of fruit tree. Gwenhwyfar and Mairona had watched as children, and laughed together as Cabal barked and growled endlessly at his escaped prey.

Their reminiscing was interrupted when Duchess Meraude entered the solar with a few of her ladies. Gwenhwyfar swiftly rose to curtsy, and Mairona followed her example. She had barely regained her feet before Richenda was shepherding her toward the king's aunt.

"Richenda!" Meraude called, a jovial smile on her round, pleasant face. "And this must be the Lady Mairona. I hope you will forgive my husband and I for not attending the feast last night. Nigel was not feeling well."

"My lady," Mairona said, dropping in a curtsy. "His Highness seemed improved today."

"He is. He tries so hard to keep up the king, who has all the energy of youth. Welcome to Rhemuth, child. You look so much like your mother I almost thought she was walking this earth again!" Meraude chuckled as Mairona's eyes grew wide.

"Another reunion?" Richenda laughed, raising an eyebrow. "For someone who has never been to Rhemuth, you seem no stranger to the court."

"I had no idea," Mairona replied, intrigued. "How did you know my mother, Madam?"

Meraude smiled, taking Mairona's arm and walking with her to a sitting area. "It was many, many years ago. We both spent a few weeks together in the convent of St. Brigid near Cùilteine making our pre-nuptial retreats. The last I heard from Maire was shortly before you were born. Mairona means 'little Maire', doesn't it? Your father did well to name you that. Lady Maire's eyes were perhaps a smokier green, and her hair a shade darker, but you are the very image of her."

Mairona chuckled. "My nurse used to tell me I inherited my mother's fair face and my father's evil temperament. I would threaten to tell her words to my father when she was angry with me."

"I think she did a disservice to your father," Meraude replied. "Maire wrote me that he made her happy."

"He adored my mother," Mairona said, smiling. "I think my nurse only referred to his obstinacy. She constantly fretted that I was an unladylike child, but my father encouraged me as his heir."

"You grew into a lady fine enough to capture Kelson's attention, unless I am misinformed," Meraude grinned.

Mairona blushed, ducking her head. "That is not why I came to Rhemuth," she murmured.

"Which is probably why he was so enthralled," Richenda remarked. "The king has grown tired of the parade of eager maidens strung out before him, all greedy for a royal marriage." She turned to her fellow duchess with a mischievous twinkle. "It was more than just attention, Meraude. Kelson looked like one of Nigel's pages serving for the first time."

"I wish I could have seen that!" Meraude chuckled. "Well, Mairona, it seems you will be spending more time at Rhemuth than you anticipated."

Mairona looked at both of them. "What do you mean?"

"The king is not in the habit of escorting young ladies to their rooms," Richenda returned, a sly, amused look in her eyes.

"Nothing happened!" Mairona protested, but Richenda raised her eyebrow, reading falsehood. "Well, he kissed me, but that is *all!*"

"We both know Kelson would never dishonor a lady," Meraude reassured her, patting her hand. "What Richenda is trying to say is that this is more than casual interest for him. My nephew is a good man and a strong king, but he is inexperienced in matters of the heart. If he kissed you, his intentions are serious and more than likely he is thinking of a possible marriage. So, the question is, would you accept marriage with him?"

"Tis all happening so fast," Mairona shook her head. "I have had so many men after my hand since my father died that my head spins thinking of them all. They were all the same; they wanted Druimfada more than me. Their words were smooth and fair, but I could Truth-Read right through them. Then last night the king showed me the sincerity I have only dreamed of. When he kissed me—I have never allowed any man kiss me before. And this morning when he was reading me about the Mearan rebels, he told me he could love me. How did this happen so quickly?"

Richenda gave Mairona a knowing smile. "Reading can be a very intimate experience for two Deryni, especially when there is some attraction between the two. Since we can sense falsehood and truth, there are no guessing games. It all happened very quickly for Alaric and me, as well. How do you feel?"

"I do not know. This is all so new," she whispered. "I feel—light—in his presence, and it pleases me. Is that affection? Could it possibly grow so strong so swiftly?"

"Aye, between Deryni," Richenda said. "Perhaps Meara will have a queen of its own blood after all." Meraude laid a hand on her fellow Duchess.

"We should let Kelson do his own wooing. Mairona, tell me about your mother. I would like to know how she fared after your birth."

The young Lady of Druimfada never had a chance to begin, due to an interruption from the king's chamber. As the door opened into the solar and the men departed, all the ladies fluttered into curtseys. Neither duchess was too distracted to miss the way Mairona's eyes lit when Kelson entered, swathed in heavy leathers, wool, and furs

"You may rise," he bade them all. His eyes went straight to the duchesses, who both nodded slightly. A smile broke across Kelson's face. "We intend to exercise ourselves and our horses, if the roads allow. Are there any ladies who wish to join us?" Most of the room plainly thought he was nuts. "Aunt? Lady Richenda?"

"Days like this are meant to be spent next to the fire," Meraude stated definitively.

"It is too cold for my eastern blood," Richenda agreed.

"My lady Mairona," Kelson's smile became softer. "You do not fear a little snow."

"Nor do I fear a lot of snow, my lord," she grinned back. "I have recently had some practice with it."

"Come, then. When you are prepared, meet us at the stables." He took her hand and brushed its knuckles against his lips while snaring her eyes through his lashes. She flushed in pleasure. With a wink, the king spun toward the solar's door and disappeared with his companions.

"Wonder no more about affection, Mairona," Richenda smirked, her blue eyes sparking in knowing humor. "The way you two look at each other, it will be mere days before you are hopelessly besotted."

* * * * *

The road was hardly suitable for proper exercise. Dhugal and his father the Bishop Duncan McLain rode a few paces behind the king, who had invited Mairona to his side the moment they were free of the castle's postern gate. A small group of the king's personal guard formed the rear. The party made agonizing progress through snow that reached their mounts' knees, guided only by the higher banks lining what should be a road. With all routes this difficult, trade suffered heavily on Rhemuth Plain, and Kelson wondered how some of the more remote and inhospitable settlements in his kingdom were doing for food and other necessities. Could they get a message out in time if they needed help?

"Sire?" Mairona called out, rescuing the king from thoughts of doom and gloom.

"Aye?"

"There is yet little occupation for me to fill my days here. I have heard that you collect texts on Deryni history and teachings. May I be allowed to use your library?"

"Certainly!" he responded, intrigued at this new interest. "In fact, you may be able to assist me there. I have recently acquired a rare item on the life of St. Camber, which the Duchess of

Corwyn has been studying for me. However, there are many annotations by a Mearan monk in his native tongue, and my lady Richenda does not speak Mearan. Perhaps you would care to translate?"

So, he encouraged ladies in intellectual studies and pursuits. Her heart thudded at this revelation. "It would be my pleasure," she told him with unbridled sincerity.

"I will make it available to you," he promised as they crested a rise that nearly matched the height of Rhemuth Castle. Eyes darted sideways to observe Mairona's reaction to the view. She gasped.

"You can see for miles!" Mairona breathed, standing in her stirrups to take in the landscape in all directions. Kelson grinned, pleased at her wonder.

"Rhemuth Plain is vastly different from the mountains. You did not notice when you arrived?"

Swallowing, Mairona eased down into her high-backed saddle. "My thoughts were otherwise occupied," she replied in a dead voice.

Aye, Kelson thought to himself distastefully as he turned back to what seemed to be the road. *Thoughts such as danger, fear, and imminent death. Idiot!* he berated himself.

Sniffing in the cold, Mairona sought to salvage the moment from her reaction, which she had regretted the moment it left her mouth. The king had only meant it in jest, after all. "What is the plain like in the spring?"

"Muddy!" shot out from behind. Twisting, Mairona caught Dhugal's freckled grin and laughed. Kelson didn't know whether to be happy that she hadn't retreated within herself again, envious that it was Dhugal who brought her back to humor, or annoyed that his blood brother had been eavesdropping. His struggle was interrupted when Mairona's horse snorted, stumbling violently. To his relief, she kept a firm seat, but when the beast recovered it heavily favored its left foreleg. Before he could think to assist, Mairona was on the ground and positioning herself to examine the lame leg.

Trying not to think about how cold the deep snow would be on his legs, Kelson dismounted and handed his reins over to the guard captain who halted at his side. The snow was icier than he had tried not to think about. Mairona had already felt down the mare's leg with practiced hands and now had its upturned hoof resting against her thigh.

"She's taken a stone," Mairona announced without looking up. "I need a dagger to free it."

"Dhugal!" Kelson called. The border duke slipped out of his saddle as easily as Mairona had and struggled through the snow. Kelson mused at how Mairona in her distraction had unwittingly slipped into the familiar role of command.

"My lady," the duke greeted when he reached her. "Allow me."

Nodding, Mairona released the mare's hoof. "Take care, my lord. She does not like having her feet handled. I will hold her head." Moving away, she took the mare's headstall in one hand and stroked its sleek neck with her other. Placing her face close to the horse's head, she spoke soft words in a language that was harsh and smoothly lyrical at the same time, similar to the sounds of Dhugal's border tongue. The mare's ears twitched, and its eyes rolled in protest of the digging at its foot, but it stood calmly under its mistress' ministrations.

Dhugal's sure hand worked swiftly and gently to extract the offending rock lodged between the shoe and a triangular ridge that traversed the center of the foot. After casually tossing it aside, he carefully probed the bruised area. "There is another problem. The removal has loosened the

shoe's nails, and it is like to come off soon. My lady, your palfrey should not bear weight until this is remedied."

"She will ride with me," Kelson announced. Mairona looked at him with a hint of question, and to his joy there was no fear or hesitation in her eyes. In fact, the corners of her lips curled up for a moment. Cocking an eyebrow in silent reply, Kelson took his horse from the guard captain and hoisted himself back into the saddle. As he pulled his mantle off the steed's haunches, Dhugal lifted Mairona to her new perch behind the great saddle, her split skirts straddling the tall gelding's broad hips.

That only left the question of what to do with her hands. Despite their growing attachment, the man before her was the king, and she would not dare uninvited physical contact in front of so many others. She tried the saddle's curved rear lip, but her fingers nearly brushed his back. Finally she settled on resting her gloves on her thighs, thinking that there was little risk of her losing her seat at the painfully slow walking pace to which they were confined.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Aye," she responded, his sudden proximity lending her senses hyper-acuity as they registered all things Kelson. The way his gloves crinkled as his fingers secured the reins in relaxed control, the way his mantle smelled of the tanner's arts and previous exercise, how his back moved when he turned forward again, the brief pressure of his leg brushing against hers as he urged his reluctant mount around towards Rhemuth. As biting as the wind was, as numb as her wet feet were, she would sit there for hours. As they rode back through the small group, the rear guard parted to let them pass, then fell back into place as they headed toward the castle.

"My lady," Kelson started, but was silenced when his horse skidded at a dip in the road. The beast's additional burden made footing more treacherous, and Mairona instinctively clutched onto the saddle's rear rim as the horse's motion threw Kelson back. Mairona cried out as her fingers were smashed between his weight and the saddle's leather-covered wood, but she forced herself to keep her grip despite the pain so she could maintain her seat. The horse recovered after a few scrambled paces, snorting annoyance at the uneven ground and the additional weight that encumbered his hindquarters. Halting the gelding firmly, Kelson leaned forward and twisted around as much as the restrictive saddle allowed.

"Mairona, are you injured?"

Warmth bloomed in her chest at the alarm in his voice, and in the way he had dropped all formality in his apprehension. She stretched and flexed her hands experimentally. "I still count ten fingers, and they all work adequately. No harm has been done."

"That relieves me." Letting out a slow breath, Kelson smiled the regret that he didn't speak. "Perhaps I will make a less painful handhold than the saddle."

"Your shoulders, my lord?" she asked, wondering just how much intimacy he would have her dare.

"Nay, that would hinder my movement should this beast stumble again. My waist will do."

Kelson heard her uneven breath as she tentatively rested her hands just above his hips. So, he was having the same effect on her that her closeness was having on him. He almost wished the horse would falter again, wondering if she would tightened her grip. Dismissing the thought as riskier than the possible end result warranted, he nudged his R'Kassi gelding forward again.

"I see the footing in the plains can be just as treacherous as in the mountains," she murmured, her foggy breath floating over his shoulder to kiss his frozen cheek with heat.

"It depends on the season, and in whom you place your trust," he replied quietly, breathing deeply of the chill air. "Could you make Rhemuth your home?"

Her hands tightened pleasantly on his waist. "Druimfada will always be my home," she said carefully, "but I believe I could be happy residing here." She could not see the royal grin that radiated light clear across the plains, but she could feel that he was deeply moved. She was amazed by the changes of the last two days, how the king's burgeoning joy at her mere presence stirred her just as deeply. It was the first time she had discovered a soul so kindred to hers, and now it was found she would do much to remain by its side. Despite her desires, though, she must never forget the obligation her father bestowed on her. "However, for my happiness to be complete, I would require the freedom to visit Druimfada frequently so I can carry out my duties to its people."

Its people, not *my* people. Were her thoughts already expanding to include greater Gwynedd in addition to her family's prosperous holding? Grasping both reins in his right hand, Kelson reached the other across his waist to take hold of hers. "I would allow that," he told her softly. Her fingers squeezed his in acceptance.