

✘ Chapter 7 ✘

It was the following day before Mairona ventured to the library, since no earthly force was tearing her away from the nearest fireplace when they returned to the keep. Kelson's attention was immediately turned to statecraft on arrival, and he had taken his leave the moment they dismounted, but the feel of his waist under her hand, and then his fingers enveloping hers, floated prominently in memory. The Duchess of Corwyn had been right. She was becoming hopelessly besotted, even though she had never dared dream—

The greatest expanse of the library's walls was lined with wooden diamond-shape cubbyholes filled with scrolls of varying sizes. The remaining space had flat shelves piled with books bound in leather, rare and expensive. Three stands held a richly decorated bound book each, obviously the most valuable possessions in the library. Mairona's first reaction was awe at the massive wealth contained in this room. Her second was absolute delight and wonder, knowing that it would take years to study every work in here, and that a number of them would be Deryni in origin. With a cry of pleasure, she sorted through the nearest treasures to see what marvels they contained.

"My lady, are you in need of assistance?"

In her excitement, Mairona had overlooked a boy with close-cropped light brown hair, gangly with the promise of manhood. He had been slumped over a scroll near the window, but the scroll was shoved into a nearby compartment as he leaped eagerly to his feet. "I am Liam," he offered with a casual bow. Liam of where? Which house?

"I am Mairona ní Dhugain of Druimfada," she returned, introducing herself properly.

"I have heard of you," the boy stated. "You are to be Queen of Gwynedd."

It was difficult not to blush, but Mairona would not do so in front of this child. "I am not betrothed," she returned firmly.

"You will be!" Liam grinned impishly. Just who was this impertinent boy? "May I help you find something?"

"Aye," Mairona said matter-of-factly, hoping to distract the boy to another topic. "The king has asked me to translate Mearan passages in a Camber history his Highness recently acquired."

Frowning, Liam tapped his finger against his hip. "I do not know of the history you speak, but I can set up a workspace for you. Then I will help you locate the Camber piece." He immediately burst across the room with the boundless energy of boyhood, disappearing underneath the lid of a hinged copy table.

"Are you a squire here?" Mairona asked. "Have you been under Prince Nigel's tutelage?"

"Aye!" his head darted up with a grin as he laid aside a small wooden box, then he vanished again inside the table's storage compartment. "How did you guess?"

"I have only been in Rhemuth for a few days, but it is long enough to see that all of the lads under his care jump at the chance to assist a lady," she chuckled.

"Given the choice between a lady's wishes and polishing harness," Liam retorted, "most of us will take the lady's wishes."

Laughing, Mairona decided she liked this boy's good-natured cheek, which was not born of ill manners after all. She wondered at the hint of foreignness in his speech as she approached the table, where Liam withdrew a few leaves of vellum. It was not of the finest quality, but would do to record her translations for Richenda and Kelson. Closing the lid, Liam carefully placed the vellum on top and took up the wooden box to extract ink and quills. "Now we only have to locate the history. Do you know if anyone has been studying it? That may help us find it."

"Find what?" a voice called from the doorway. Smiling, Mairona turned to receive the king and made to curtsy. A wave of his hand dismissed the thought, and instead he took her hand to kiss it in greeting.

"My lady said you have a new Camber history," Liam stated. Mairona wondered at the contrast between his formality in reference to her, and his obvious familiarity toward the king. Could this be one of his cousins? The boys' given names were Rory and Payne, to her recollection, but was one familiarly called Liam? She had been told that both brothers had the Haldane black hair and gray eyes, though. Perhaps a baseborn cousin? Or even a bastard brother? Her breath caught at the thought.

"Aye, I do. There is also something recently arrived for you," Kelson announced as he counted down the columns of scrolls.

"For me? What?" Liam's eyes lit in anticipation

"Two items. The first is a history of the Festillic Interregnum in Gwynedd. The second is about the House of Festil in Torenth once my ancestors regained the Gwyneddi throne."

My ancestors, not our ancestors. Not a Haldane by-blow, then. Who was this boy?

Finding the proper storage cubicle, Kelson pulled out two scrolls and unrolled them just enough to verify their contents. "Here they are." He handed them over to the boy, who took them reverently.

"Thank you," he exhaled. "May I remove them from the library?"

"They are yours. You may do with them as you like."

Grinning in unchecked happiness, Liam turned to go, but hesitated and changed his mind. His expression turned almost sheepish. "I have a question."

"Go on," Kelson prompted.

"It seems to me," Liam started, then hesitated to rethink his words. "The House of Festil is the enemy of the House of Haldane."

"Was," Kelson corrected. "The Festils are gone."

"Yet their blood flows in my veins, and they were enemies of the Haldanes."

Sighing, Kelson leaned against a row of shelving and studied the boy closely. Mairona was completely intrigued, and stood fixed in hopes of watching this interaction play out in full.

"Liam," Kelson finally started, "you have already read of the Interregnum. What do you think of the Festillic kings?"

The boy squirmed, like he was much younger than his twelve years. "Imre the Last deserved to be overthrown, but not all of them seem bad."

"You are very astute. Some of them were good kings," Kelson admitted. Liam's bearing eased at this affirmation.

"They cared for the kingdom more than their own power," Liam observed, "but they were enemies of the Haldanes. That is why Gwynedd and Torenth have warred ever since your House was restored."

"Aye, and that was only because Imre the Last was so corrupt and demented that he spurned his intended bride to impregnate his own sister. If he had been a good king, it is likely that St. Camber would never have had cause to restore the House of Haldane two hundred years ago. Cinhil Haldane would have died a childless priest instead of a king, my bloodline would have ceased to exist, and there might still be a Festil on the throne of Gwynedd. Torenth warred with Gwynedd for two hundred years to restore the Festil line, but that house has been extinct for six years now. High time to end the fighting, is it not?" Kelson cocked an eyebrow. Standing as tall as he could, Liam nodded. "Enough history for today. Prince Nigel will be wanting you for arms practice with Payne."

Rolling his eyes, Liam groaned. "That means more harness polishing when we are through."

Laughing, Kelson shoved the boy toward the door. "I had to do it, too, when I was your age. Go on!"

Before he left, Liam turned back towards Mairona and gave her a half-bow. "My lady," he called in parting, then he flashed a grin to Kelson, and was gone.

"Who was that?" Mairona breathed. Chuckling, Kelson shook his head.

"He did not tell you?"

"He said his name is Liam?" Mairona shrugged, clearly indicating that it was no answer at all.

"That is what we call him," Kelson told her, "for it is his given name. His people know him as Lajos II, King of Torenth."

"The—" Mairona instantly thought better of her words and clamped her jaws shut.

"Hostage king?" Kelson finished for her with a raised eyebrow. "Aye, defeating his uncle, the late King Wencit, was not enough to keep peace with Torenth. That war made me Torenth's overlord, but Liam is still a minor and his other uncle Mahael has no respect for the terms made six years ago. I am compelled to keep Liam here to enforce peace along our borders, and that is why I must be responsible for making certain he is ready to assume Torenth's crown when he comes of age. If I can seat that boy firmly on his throne, he is my best hope for lasting peace between Gwynedd and Torenth."

"And he reaches his majority two summers hence," Mairona murmured thoughtfully as Kelson started rooting through the bound books.

"Ah, here it is," he finally proclaimed as he extracted a plain tome worn with time and ill-use. "Richenda said there was an allusion to a relic of St. Camber, and a profusion of Mearan commentary around it. When I was knighted, I swore to find a relic for the chapel I plan on building at St. Hilary's, dedicated to Camber. So far I have not been successful. There, that must be Richenda's mark." A scrap of green cotton winked from between the pages. Mairona sat on the worktable's bench as Kelson settled next to her, delicately paging through the aging vellum to reach Richenda's placeholder.

"You are dedicated to restoring his cult?" Mairona wondered.

"Aye. I have had visions of him. The first was at my coronation, when he pronounced blessing on my crown with the archbishop." Kelson shuddered at the memory.

"You fear him?"

"St. Camber? No." Kelson shook his head. "His presence is benevolent, father-like. I was merely remembering the former Archbishop Loris, who did the crowning."

Mairona shuddered, too. Loris had been zealous in persecuting Deryni, burning them at the stake to cleanse them of their "sin." Once he discovered Kelson's own Deryni heritage through Jehana, he allied himself with the Mearan Pretender Caitrin to overthrow the "demon king," and he murdered anyone who got in his way, be they bishop or lord.

"You had him hung in Laas, did you not?" Mairona asked.

"Aye, and that is one execution I would be happy to repeat. Ah, there is the leaf Richenda marked. What do you make of it?"

Squinting in concentration, Mairona leaned closer to the text to make out the tiny notes scrawled in the manuscript's margin. She never noticed Kelson close his eyes as her hair brushed pleasantly on the back of his hand, sending a tingling sensation up his arm and into his gut.

"This commentator monk was no copyist," she muttered, bringing Kelson back to the book. "His letters are ill-formed and difficult to make out. There is something about servants scattering across the Eleven Kingdoms, taking relics to safety during the persecutions. Two to the deserts with the remnants of the Order of St. Michael, one to great Byzantyun, wait! Meara? The church of the wood at Druimkyriel?" Her brow knitted in concentration. "Shiral..." She exploded in excitement. "The Holy Shiral was carried by his servants to the church of the wood at Druimkyriel! It was given to Druimkyriel by one of his grandchildren!"

"Druimkyriel," Kelson repeated, echoing her enthusiasm. "Kyriell is another name for Camber, and was used when his followers were forced underground by the Church Council of Ramos. Does it say where Druimkyriel is?"

Blinking, Mairona leaned back. "It does not have to. I already know." Suddenly his hands were holding her head, turning it to meet his eyes which were intense with impatience.

"Where?" Kelson demanded.

"The church is now in ruin," she whispered. "Druimkyriel was the name for an abandoned settlement in southern Druimfada."

He kissed her soundly, without warning, and a liquid flame thrilled through her body. His subsequent withdrawal was disconcerting, though he kept her head cradled between his hands. Conflict tore within her, a guilt for wanting this man over duty to her father's lands, the intense desire for him to kiss her again, and the acknowledgement of a bond grown so strong between them that it could only have been bidden by God's will. Her eyelids fluttered. "I think I could love you, too," she mumbled, harking back to their shared rapport in his chambers.

"Marry me," he whispered fiercely. "Marry me and be my queen. Will you do that?"

The bond won her inner struggle with little contest. "Aye," she gasped, the word raw. "Aye, I will do that."

He *did* kiss her again, and her arms mysteriously became entangled around his waist and shoulders. "Kelson," she whispered against his lips when he slid an arm around her shoulders.

"I like the sound of that," he chuckled happily, leaning his forehead against hers.

"Of what?"

One hand still cupped her cheek, and its thumb extended to brush her lips. "You, speaking my name."

"Oh." Nervous giggles tugged at her mouth and eyes. "You fair distracted me from proper address." She took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. "In fact, you drive an innocent maid to unvirtuous distraction."

"What?" Kelson exclaimed in mock alarm, separating from her. "My lady is having impure thoughts?"

"Aye," she grinned back, "and you are the very devil at the root of them!"

"You wound me, lady!" he retorted, playfully stabbing his chest with a finger. In a poor imitation of death throes, he fell backwards to lie on the bench. Laughing, Mairona caught his arm and helped pull him up.

"As if you were not entertaining similar ideas," she accused him.

"Alas, you have discovered me," he jested, reaching for one of her hands, but their banter was disrupted by the sound of heavy footsteps approaching. They sprang away from each other, settling on opposite sides of the bench. The approaching company was led by Prince Nigel, followed by guardsmen.

"Yes, Uncle?" Kelson sighed in disappointment, motioning him in.

"Forgive me for interrupting. A courier has arrived from Rolf of Tirkeeve. His missive concerns the Lady Mairona," the prince said apologetically. He may not have been Deryni, but it was still obvious that this was not the most opportune time to intrude.

Kelson stood, visions of what Rolf had done to Mairona flooding his consciousness. The beating, the threatened rape, a mixture of fear and fury— He glanced down at her, suspecting that the thoughts were not entirely his own. "Show the man in, Uncle," he said, his voice turning hard. He sensed Mairona stiffening next to him, a very unpleasant look on her face. A short, dark man in the gray and yellow livery of Rolf's house made his way through some wary guards and entered. Mairona's eyes widened in recognition.

"My lord," the man bowed curtly. "Your Highness," he bowed deeply to Mairona. She glanced at Kelson in reaction to this man's obvious disrespect toward the king, wanting to say something. He motioned her to keep still.

"Your message, sir," the king demanded coolly.

"My Lord Rolf wishes her Highness to know that her household guard has turned traitor, holding Druimfada Castle in the name of the wrongful usurper King of Gwynedd. They would not yield in the name of their true sovereign lady queen, so Rolf has imprisoned your disloyal men and assures you that he has installed his own for the safety of your stronghold," the man recited. "He has sent a letter to this effect." The courier handed a leather missive tube to Mairona, who passed it absently to Kelson as she stood, her rage visibly radiating.

"He would dare imprison *my* men?!" she spat at the messenger. "My men, sworn to *my* loyal service and carrying out *my* orders?!" She could not believe that this man stood emotionless

as he delivered such disgraceful news. "You would countenance this outrage, James? What have become of my servants?"

"Those that defied the Lord Rolf have also been imprisoned. Your Highness' steward was killed a traitor in the struggle, along with a few dozen guardsmen and five servingmen."

"*He killed Tadhg?*" Mairona said slowly in a low voice. She was shaking with fury. "Old Tadhg was over sixty years old. Do you willingly serve a so-called chieftain who murders old men? Does your lord make war on women and children, too?"

Concerned with the violent hatred her Deryni senses broadcasted, Kelson touched her arm. She fell silent, sitting back down on the bench that they had recently shared.

"Uncle, remove this man. I wish to question him further later," the king ordered.

"Aye, Kelson," Nigel replied, knowing exactly how the king intended to question the messenger.

"Wait," Mairona pleaded, pressing her hands to her temples. After a calming breath, she looked up at Kelson, who studied her in return. He nodded. Rising, Mairona approached the messenger. "James, you have seen the atrocities Rolf commits on my people, on his own fellow Mearans. He has foresworn all right to be called chieftain. Renounce your allegiance to him and swear loyalty to the King of Gwynedd. Help me regain Druimfada" The man stared at her stupidly. "James, will you stand with me or no?"

"I do not know you, my lady," the man said stiltedly. "I know not of what you speak."

Mairona fisted her hands at her sides. "Someone has tampered with his mind," she hissed, reaching out to touch him.

"No!" Kelson commanded curtly. She jerked back, shooting angered frustration at him. "If his mind has been violated, who knows what traps lie in wait?"

"I am aware of that!" she spat through her teeth.

"Then you are also aware of the dangers of venturing in alone," he returned evenly. "This man will be dealt with." Kelson nodded to his uncle, who directed two of the house guard to drag the courier from the library. Mairona's hopes for regaining Druimfada with little loss were dragged away with James, and her indignation evaporated to disbelief as she stumbled to the bench in bewilderment.

"He has taken my home," she uttered in a child-like voice, very unlike her earlier tone. "What will become of my people? All my loyal men? What have I done to them?"

"You have done what duty required, nothing more and certainly no less. You are not responsible for Rolf's crimes." Kelson sat next to her, wrapping her in a tight embrace. "I swear to you, Mairona, as soon as the army can be summoned I will win Druimfada back for you. I shall be the instrument of your vengeance."

"I know you will. All those people, people who have served me well, are now dead because of their unfailingly loyalty." She looked away for a moment, biting her lip.

"You knew that man by name," Kelson ventured tenderly.

"Aye. I rode border patrol with him several times."

"You what?!"

Snorting, Mairona shook her head. "You do not think I ruled Druimfada while stitching in the hall, do you? Mearan mountain law may allow a lady to inherit a chiefdom and rule in her own right, but it also dictates that a chief must be blooded in battle. My father decreed that I ride with border patrols until one encountered outlaws. Their leader was captured by my father's captain, and I had to kill him." Kelson's jaw worked up and down as he tried to say something, but all attempts died as he tried to assimilate this bit of history. "You have not heard of the legendary ancient warrior queens of Meara?" she leveled at him.

"Aye, and I thought them just that—ancient legend," he responded, still bewildered but slowly digesting this revelation. "You certainly do not intend to continue this nonsense?" It was phrased as a question, but clearly issued as a command.

She sighed, facing plainly the first restriction of this new life that now bound her. "The weather does not allow it, anyway. Here we have to sit powerless for a whole month, with all those good men imprisoned and in danger. I wish there were something we could do now, Kelson. I feel so—helpless."

"There is nothing that can be done until the spring floods dissipate," he said, stroking her hair. "But there is something that would send Lord Rolf into fits."

"What is it?" she asked, a small glimmer of hope shining in her eyes.

"If he wants a Queen of Meara now, let us give him one," Kelson replied.

"What do you mean?" she asked, just beginning to follow his thoughts.

"If we marry before I march into Meara, he would be put in the unenviable position of unlawfully holding his queen's land, and warring with her husband, his lawful king. That is assuming he is too proud to surrender before it comes to that." He held her hands tightly, waiting for her response. She smiled slowly, calculating, thinking about Rolf's reaction when he received news that the woman he chose to make queen had married the very king he was trying to rise against.

"Yes, I agree," she said, "and I wish I could watch Rolf's face turn purple when he hears about this."

"Let us seek out Duncan, then, to witness our betrothal vows." Standing, Kelson reached his hand to her, but she shook her head.

"I—May I have some time alone first? I need to gather my thoughts and grieve," she pleaded with him.

"Aye," he told her gently, bending to kiss her forehead. "I will send for you later." He looked back at her as long as he could before leaving the library, and she returned his gaze, feeling the same awe that he did at the magic happening between them. The wonder evaporated with the click of the door latch as it closed behind Kelson.

Mairona turned back to the history, haunted by visions of soldiers and servants killed, wounded, or locked away. All those men, all *her* men, dead or imprisoned. She should have been there. She had abandoned them to their fate, neglecting her duty to her people. Her head throbbed, and she clutched her temples as her massive shield wall pulsed in tune to the pounding. *Silence! No one is trying to harm me. Be still.*

She needed a prayer book, or a bible.

It was one of the three jewel-encrusted books on prominent display, in a well-lit corner of the library. Mairona moved in front of it, carefully opened the weighty tome to the Psalms, and started reading aloud through eyes blurred with the threat of tears.

“Do not reprove me in your anger, Lord, nor punish me in your wrath. Have pity on me, Lord, for I am weak; heal me, Lord, for my bones are trembling. In utter terror is my soul—and you, Lord, how long...? Turn, Lord, save my life; in your mercy rescue me. For who among the dead remembers you? Who praises you in Sheol? I am wearied with sighing; all night long tears drench my bed; my couch is soaked with weeping. My eyes are dimmed with sorrow, worn out because of all my foes.”

The threatening tears finally spilled over, and she could read no more. Collapsing back onto the bench, she buried her face in her hands. After saying a silent prayer for the souls of those who had died, especially Tadhg, she allowed herself to cry for the dead and the for men who were still locked in the dark.