

✘ Chapter 11 ✘

Mairona woke up the next morning with a headache, but some careful Deryni ministrations and breakfast brought its' screaming under control. She had risen too late to attend the daily Mass, much to her disappointment, but she had desperately needed the sleep. Now Kelson had summoned her, and she hurriedly swallowed the last bit of bread before going to meet him, Saraid in tow.

She met Kelson in his chambers, sitting at a worktable over a stack of scrolls and sheaves of vellum.

"Good morrow, Mairona" he called with a grin.

"Good morrow," she replied, curtsying in front of his squires.

"Are you well rested?" he asked, gesturing to a stool beside him.

"Alert, at least," she answered, sitting. *I woke with a devil of a headache.*

That does not surprise me, he chuckled. *We did not quite end that neatly.*

You mean I did not end it neatly, she countered. *I was the one doing the scrying. I made the mistake.*

"Well, I am glad you are alert, because I would like you to attend the council meeting shortly," Kelson continued their verbal speech. "We shall be discussing Meara, of course, so you should be present."

"I shall gladly come," she replied. "Will anything else be discussed?"

"Oh, aye," Kelson grinned broadly. "My Lord Marshal, Duke Ewan of Claibourne, has been pestering me to marry from the moment he saw the crown placed on my head. Now I could not possibly waste an opportunity like that, could I?"

Mairona was amused at the images Kelson sent her of teasing the old duke. "You can count on me to play along," she laughed. "I understand completely. My advisors have been after me to marry since my father died. I used to get so angry."

"Well, then," Kelson smiled mischievously, taking her hand. "Shall we go harass my good councilors?"

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The council was already assembled when Kelson entered, Mairona only a step behind. They were grouped in twos and threes, conversing quietly while they waited on their king. Mairona instantly caught a recognizable face and beamed in happiness.

"Father..." She faltered as she took in the very different manner of his dress. "Father Thomas?"

The face underneath the richly decorated bishop's miter smiled warmly. "Good morrow, my child," he greeted her.

"You have already met the archbishop?" Kelson wondered.

"Archbishop?" Mairona's eyes darted between Kelson and Father Thomas in puzzlement, then lit with understanding. "Archbishop Thomas Cardiel," she concluded. "We met at St. Hilary's," she informed Kelson.

"We did indeed," Cardiel agreed. "Forgive my deception, my lady. I had heard of your arrival, and your presence in St. Hilary's while I had business there. You looked in need of a simple priest, and sometimes my office can hinder delivery of those services."

"There is no need for forgiveness," Mairona conceded. "Your advice was sound."

Nodding to the king, Cardiel took his leave. Private conversations trailed off to silence as Kelson approached his throne at the head of the table, and his councilors took their own places.

"Please, be seated," Kelson commanded, motioning Mairona to a place at his right. She looked around the table, seeing how many men she could recognize. Prince Nigel was there, of course, and Morgan, Duncan, and Dhugal were seated close to the king. There was Archbishop Cardiel further down, and perhaps the bishop next to him was Archbishop Bradene? Then there were the secular lords, and who was Ewan of Claibourne?

Over there, and I warn you he's not one to mince words. He speaks what he thinks as soon as he thinks it, Kelson sent to her, along with the image of his face. She picked him out immediately, in muted border dress, looking as rugged and worn as the land he came from.

"Welcome, my lords," Kelson greeted, starting the meeting. "We have some serious business to discuss this morning, gentlemen. But first, would Archbishop Bradene say the blessing?"

Mairona barely heard the archbishop's words as she tried to do light surface readings of the men around her, trying to put names to faces. She hoped to make it around the complete table, but was not even close when Archbishop Bradene came to the close of the brief blessing, "*In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.*"

"Amen," everyone replied, crossing themselves.

"Gentlemen," Kelson started, "I would like to introduce you to our unwilling Mearan upstart. This is Lady Mairona ní Dhugain of Druimfada, our new pretender Queen of Meara."

Those who had arrived in the past day muttered to themselves, still wondering at her presence in the royal council hall. Kelson silenced them with a raised hand so he could continue.

"She has fled to Rhemuth to show her loyalty to Gwynedd's crown and has given me what she knows about the uprising. As we suspected, Rolf of Tirkeeve is the man behind it. He was the one to proclaim Mairona queen and has raised an army, albeit a pitifully small one."

Several of the men nodded greeting to her, and she returned the gesture. Ewan grinned ear to ear when they exchanged glances. "There's a bonnie solution tae the wee Mearan problem," he chuckled good-naturedly.

"I think we all know very well what happened the last time I tried to solve the Mearan problem in that fashion," Kelson said pointedly.

"The lassie dinnae hae greedy brothers," Ewan argued. "Ye've been king far too lang without breedin' heirs."

Even though Kelson had warned Mairona about Ewan's loose tongue, the very frankness of his words still shocked her. To speak that way, not only in front of the king, but before her as well! No wonder Kelson wanted to play with him a little.

"The lady is *not* simply breeding stock," Kelson said fiercely. "You would do well to remember that she is present."

May I speak? she asked Kelson. He sent a brief confirmation, but before she could open her mouth Ewan was continuing.

"The lassie migh' welcome the chance," the Claibourne duke muttered under his breath. "Most ladies would."

"How *dare* you?" Mairona exclaimed, her eyes flashing fire. It was all Kelson could do to keep his face schooled in a serious expression. "How dare you speak about me as if I were some cattle to be traded in the marketplace?" Ewan's jaw worked up and down, but no sound came out. "In my presence no less, you presume to bargain me off like livestock? If my defection does not solve your Mearan problem, how could marriage help? You, who are neither my father nor my legal guardian, presume to give me off simply to breed heirs for our king without asking my wishes or even my eligibility?"

"Weel, lass," Ewan started, but Mairona wouldn't let him continue.

"I am already promised in marriage, and unless you wish to incur my future husband's just wrath, you cannot simply give me to whomever you wish! If you so much as try, I shall scream protest in front of the priest you find to countenance such a heinous deed."

Kelson had to mask a snicker under the guise of a cough. "My lord Ewan, you heard what the lady said."

"Who is the puir lad?" Ewan asked. "We should all pray the Lord gie him patience tae handle her fire."

Mairona and Kelson exchanged droll looks, then split into grins. "Well," Kelson replied, pinning the Duke of Claiborne with his gaze, "start praying for me because it certainly will not be the most placid of marriages, though the Lord will bless me with a happy one. I have decided that the wedding will be in three weeks, and if you do not attend after all the grief you have given me, I shall consider it high treason!"

"Ye sly fox!" Ewan exclaimed, turning several shades of red and one or two hues of purple. "I wouldnae miss it, an attendin' would damn me for all eternity. I'd marry ye meself, an it came tae that. Congratulations, laddie, tho' I'm glad 'tis ye an' nae me who will hae his hands full wi' her."

"Thank you, Ewan, though I would hope with all the good bishops at hand I would find at least one priest willing to perform the ceremony," Kelson smiled, looking at the archbishops.

"I certainly have no objections, and I do not believe that my brother does either," Cardiel chuckled. "'Tis time we had to marry our king off."

"Aye," Bradene affirmed. "And I suspect our brother Duncan will be assisting?"

"Not even hellhounds would keep me away," Duncan grinned. "Though I confess, Kelson, for a while you had me wondering whether you intended to marry the lady at all."

"Absolutely," Kelson smiled, winking at Mairona. She smiled back. "I wish your services to witness and affirm our betrothal vows. And I am certain you will agree that she has the makings of an excellent queen. Nigel, she will assist you this summer when I am away."

"Very well," the prince returned, "though you will not be away very long. Rolf only has five hundred men, and that will not take long to clean up."

"I am afraid things are more serious than we realized," Kelson sighed. "Gentlemen, this is not simply a Mearan problem. I have discovered that Mahael of Torenth has been backing Rolf and giving him mercenaries to distract me so the Torenthi army could march over my border unhindered. So the real question is, how do I deal with both problems at the same time?"

There was angry muttering around the table. Nigel was initially shocked, but his face hardened as it all started to make sense. "Of course. Mahael only has two campaigning seasons left before Liam comes of age."

"Torenth is the bigger threat," one of Kelson's barons ventured. "We should deal with that first."

"I shall not argue that it is more dangerous," Dhugal replied, "however, the Cloome Mountains will be passable before the Rheljan or Coamer Mountains. If we could take care of Rolf quickly, he will be out of the way so we could concentrate on Torenth."

"Agreed," Kelson said. "If Rolf can be taken care of quickly. I would only have a few weeks in Meara before I would have to turn around for Torenth. That would not leave me much time to settle things to my satisfaction."

"I may be able to help," Mairona interjected. "The mountain chiefs think I am their queen. I could try to convince them with letters to swear allegiance to Gwynedd, so some of them will desert over the rest of winter. In the spring, if I visibly accompany you, most of the remaining men will desert Rolf."

"I agree with the letters," Kelson told her. "But you are *not* going with me to Meara. There is too much danger."

"There will not *be* any danger if my presence convinces the chieftains to desert Rolf," she argued.

"I will hear no debate over it," Kelson insisted. "You will remain in Rhemuth."

Mairona was clearly displeased, but she remained silent. Her father had charged her to care for Druimfada and its people, and she was now stuck in Rhemuth while its people needed her more than ever. The longer Kelson waited to handle the situation, the greater chance that people would die by Rolf's hand. How could she get through to Kelson? She wouldn't be able to persuade him in front of his council, that much was clear. Morgan proceeded with the discussion as her thoughts continued to batter at her dilemma.

"If the lady can persuade many men to desert Rolf, then the best thing would be to strike at Torenth first. Two weeks is not enough time to soundly defeat Rolf and restore the peace, especially if he decides to hole himself up at Druimfada. If you have to leave Meara without first disposing of Rolf, it could cause you more problems. The delay in the spring thaw in the Rheljan Mountains will not be a help," the Deryni duke said. Many men muttered agreement.

"That does seem the best course of action," Kelson agreed. "Until we can find out more information, all we can do is sit and wait. I plan on sending messages reminding Mahael that the Torenthi king is still my hostage, but I do not hold any illusions that he will change his mind on the invasion. Liam will accompany me as my squire on campaign. Perhaps it will demoralize the Torenthi army to see their king in enemy lines. Uncle, make arrangements to raise the full army as soon as we can march it over to the Torenthi border. Now, unless there is other business?" He scanned around the table, but nobody had any. "Very well, then. The meeting is adjourned."

The king rose from his seat, everyone else following suit. He was accompanied by Morgan and Dhugal when he left, with Mairona following close behind, her heart sinking as she began to

realize that Druimfada's hope was slipping away. She waited until they were clear of the council chamber before speaking.

"My lord king?" she called. He slowed to let her walk in line with him.

"Aye?" he replied.

"Is there nothing to be done for Druimfada now?" she asked him, grief-stricken eyes tearing at his heart.

"It must wait, Mairona. I am sorry," he replied reluctantly. He could feel her desperate frustration as if it were his own.

"You know I have ridden with border patrols in Druimfada. Let me ride with a small company of men to Meara and see what good I can do," she begged. He stopped and took her hand, looking down at her. Her eyes beseeched him to help her.

"Beloved, it will not help me to ride against Torenth while worrying about what is happening to you, and I cannot spare the men to send you to Meara. It is simply too dangerous, and I need you here in Rhemuth to help Nigel. I will free Druimfada as soon as the Torenthi threat is eliminated. You must understand." Kelson touched her cheek lightly.

"I do," she half-choked on a threatening sob. "Duty must always come first."

"I have to take care of some other matters now. You should join the ladies in the solar. It would give you good opportunity to start choosing your ladies-in-waiting," he suggested.

"Very well," she whispered, lowering her eyes as she curtseyed formally to him. Her despair threatened to tear a rent in Kelson's heart. He took her arm before she could depart.

"Mairona, I truly am sorry," he told her.

"It cannot be helped," she replied, then walked brusquely past him toward the stair to the solar.

Kelson breathed heavily before turning back to Morgan and Dhugal. "It seems I have yet some things to learn of women," he said.

Morgan smiled wistfully as he replied. "You, me, and every other man in God's creation."