

✠ Chapter 12 ✠

Afterwards, Mairona had joined the ladies in the solar, playing a commandeered harp and singing Mearan songs as the ladies did their needlework. Richenda sat next to her, with Meraude nearby, trying good-naturedly to follow along with the chorus, and Gwenhwyfar rested at her feet in a burgeoning Mearan hero-worship. Her tune floated through the solar as she sang of a nobleman's wedding.

*Bhí móran daoine uasal ann,
Bhí tuatanaigh na Meara ann,
Bhí 'n maistir agus an sagart ann,
Bhí an loach mac Amhlaigh ann.*

*Dónal, 'se Dónal, 'se Dónal a rinne an bhainis,
Dónal agus Mórag a rinne an bhainis ainmeil...*

"What does it mean?" Gwenhwyfar asked when the song was over.

"It was Donal and Morag who made a famous wedding," Mairona translated. "It tells of all the people, noble and common, who came as guests and the food served at the feast."

"An appropriate song, do you not think?" Richenda asked with a smile.

Mairona blushed. "I did not mean it that way. 'Tis a song I grew up with as a child."

"Play another one, my lady" Gwenhwyfar requested.

"Alright." Mairona tipped the small harp back to her shoulder, doing a light run up the strings as she tried to think of what to do next. Her thoughts were interrupted by a woman entering the room, dressed entirely in light grey. Richenda and Meraude rose to greet her, so Mairona did likewise. If Meraude rose, it must be Queen Jehana, the notorious Deryni hater and Mairona's future mother-in-law. The Queen Mother was rail-thin, with a pinched face that looked older than her years. Her hair was entirely hidden beneath a wimple and veil that bore striking resemblance to a nun's habit.

"Good day, Jehana," Meraude greeted warmly. "We are so rarely graced with your company in the solar."

"Where is she?" Jehana spoke expressionlessly, barely above a whisper.

"Madam?" Meraude replied, confused.

"The Mearan Deryni girl. Where is she?" the Queen Mother repeated.

Tilting the harp back on its stand, Mairona curtsied. "I am Mairona ní Dhugain of Druimfada."

Jehana looked at her closely, her face a blank wall. Mairona felt her scrutiny like a snake slithering up her back, but she forced herself to remain composed and stood her ground, though respectfully. This woman was going to be her mother by marriage, so she should at least try to start things civilly. Jehana took a step forward, but stopped suddenly, unwilling to approach the Deryni girl too closely.

"You were with my son at the feast a few nights ago," the queen stated.

"Yes, Madam," Mairona replied.

"You are Deryni," the queen spat.

"Yes, Madam," Mairona repeated.

"What are your intentions here at Rhemuth?" Jehana demanded.

"Intentions, Madam? I came here for safety. Rolf of Tirkeeve was threatening to marry me by force, if necessary."

"Why did you come to my son?" Jehana's eyes bore down on Mairona, who had to suppress a shiver.

"He is the king, Madam. He is sworn to protect me."

Meraude decided it was time to intervene. "Jehana, Mairona is to be your daughter-in-law. Kelson asked her to marry him."

"No," the old queen almost whimpered, raising a hand to her face. "Marry a Deryni. No."

"Our previous king married a Deryni," Mairona replied pointedly. Jehana got a painful look on her face. Her eyes darted around the room as if she were trying to escape something unseen, something clawing away within her.

"He did not know," Jehana whispered.

Mairona saw an opening and leaped for it. "Does that change things, your Majesty? You are Deryni, as is the king. As am I. The Church does not persecute us anymore, Madam. Our powers are not evil, and the bishops have confirmed that. Is the Church mistaken?"

Jehana shook her head, beginning to weep. Mairona felt a surprising sympathy for her. How torn she must be inside, hating her very existence, bred from birth to believe that the powers within her were the gift of the devil's spawn. Instead of the wrathful Deryni-hater she had expected, the Queen Mother turned out to be a tortured soul, confused by her own existence and the complete reversal of the Church's stance on Deryni.

"Madam, you must believe what the Church now teaches. It will give you peace."

"You do not understand, child. You could never understand." Jehana looked at her pathetically, then wheeled and fled the room. Mairona looked to Meraude.

"That did not go too badly," the duchess said.

"I pity her," Mairona replied. "Until she can reconcile herself with the Church's new teachings now that the Ramos Statutes are revoked, her soul will always be tearing in two pieces. I may border on heresy for saying this, but all the fires of hell would be hard-put to be more torturous than that."

Meraude silently agreed.

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Kelson had gone through a large part of his afternoon attending to routine tasks, but a guilty conscience nagged at the back of his mind. He knew that Mairona cared a great deal about Druimfada and her people, and was naturally upset that her family seat would suffer in Rolf's

hands. The way she had just brushed past him betrayed her hurt at his helplessness to free them immediately. He must try to make things right.

"Dolfin," he called, setting his quill into its stand on the table. The squire rushed up dutifully.

"My lord?"

"I have had enough for now. See that messengers are dispatched with these. I am going to the solar."

Dolfin took the missives and opened his mouth, but obviously changed his mind. "Yes, my lord," was all he said, turning to leave.

"Dolfin," the king called. The squire stopped suddenly and turned around.

"Yes, Sire?"

"What is it?" Kelson asked, leaning back in his chair with a smile. The squire looked very sheepish.

"Well, Sire," he chuckled nervously. "I was going to ask if I could accompany your Highness, but thought it was wiser to do my duty."

"Would the reason be named Gwenhwyfar?" Kelson wondered.

"Yes, my lord." Dolfin looked slightly embarrassed.

"I would not want to keep you from your lady love," Kelson said mischievously. "Not when I am going to meet mine. Give the missives to Ivo and join me."

Dolfin happily followed the king to the ladies' solar, with the uncharacteristic expression of a happy sheepdog. Kelson slipped in unobtrusively, motioning Dolfin to do the same. Someone was singing to a harp, and it sounded like—

It was Mairona. Kelson smiled, leaning against the wall to listen. She noticed him the moment he had entered the room and met his eyes briefly, but continued with her song. Dolfin slipped away to Gwenhwyfar, who smiled shyly as she looked up at him from under her lashes. That was sweet.

Kelson had never heard music played by a Deryni before, and it was enchanting. There was a magnetism that held everyone captive, so much so that no one had noticed him enter, even when Dolfin had walked across the room. The music became a living thing, breathing and pulsing in the room, dancing in the late afternoon sun washing in on weak winter rays. Sweet *Jesu*, she was gorgeous.

The ballad ended with a flourishing coda on the harp, played with a delicate skill that would challenge some troubadours. When the last note sounded, Mairona sat frozen, all her attention on the strings, until its sound had faded. Even then there was only appreciative, stunned silence in the room.

"That was beautiful," Kelson said quietly. Only then did the ladies notice him, and they scurried to rise and curtsy to him. He motioned them back down to their seats as he walked to Mairona, who had moved only to tilt the harp back on its stand.

"Thank you, Sire," she said.

"Would you talk with me?" he asked, offering his hand. Wordlessly, she took it and allowed him to help her up. He led her to a window embrasure out of sight and earshot of the other women.

"Where did you learn to play the harp like that?" he wondered, awe still in his voice.

"I pestered my father's bard until he taught me." She smiled briefly at the memory of the old bard finally flinging up his hands and agreeing in exasperation, just so he could get a moment's peace.

"Was he Deryni, to teach you to sing like that?"

"No," Mairona replied. "That just happened. 'Tis like using Deryni powers to help improve aim in archery, I would wager."

"Perhaps I should send you to the Torenthi court. You could charm Mahael into peace with Gwynedd using music like that," Kelson smiled.

"If you will not let me go to Druimfada, you certainly will not let me near Torenth. Did you attend to all the things you needed to?" she asked, pointedly reminding him of their conversation after the council meeting.

Kelson looked down, but raised his head to eyes to hers before he spoke. "I am sorry for the manner in which I dismissed you," he said quietly. "I know you care a great deal for your people, and this is very hard for you."

Mairona smiled, relieved that he had the humility to apologize. "You are the king, and will always have a burden on your mind. You must think of Gwynedd first, as painful as that may sometimes be. I will grow accustomed to it."

Slipping an arm around her waist, Kelson pulled her down to sit with him on the window seat. She settled on his lap, and he pulled her close. "No matter what the crown dictates I must do, I love you," he whispered.

"I know," she replied, resting her head on his shoulder. "I do understand, but it is difficult. I dream about my men, some whom I know well, locked away in the dark at Druimfada. Sometimes I wonder if they really are dreams, or if I am actually seeing them. I see Rolf, strutting around my castle like it is his own. And I wonder what will become of Fergal."

"Have you sent out your letter to him?"

"He might even have it by now," she replied. "I sent it with one of your Deryni couriers. The man said that there was a transfer portal in Ratharkin, part of the new Deryni messenger network you set up. Druimfada is not too far south from there."

"Then we should hear from him soon." Kelson played with her hair, wrapping its curls around his fingers. She sighed, a small smile on her face, and snuggled even closer in his arms.

"Your Duke Ewan is a very interesting fellow," Mairona said, changing to a less painful subject.

"He is," Kelson chuckled. "And you played him like a seasoned courtier earlier."

"My father taught me well."

"He did indeed." Kissing the top of her head, he drank the light scent of rose water. Together they looked out the window to the snow-covered gardens in silence. She seemed so withdrawn, lost behind her shields. Physically, she was affectionate enough, but her mind was

leagues away. Nudging her psychically, Kelson encouraged her to share what was troubling her. She smiled nervously.

"You are better than I thought," she told him. "You were not supposed to notice anything."

"Twas not Deryni perception," he confessed. "You are too closed up for me to get past your shields. I was only reading your face."

"That is a talent in its own right, sometimes as powerful as Deryni abilities," she replied.

"Now you are avoiding my question. What is wrong? Is it still me?"

"No," she shook her head. "Well, not what happened in the council earlier."

"But it is me?"

"Partly," she confessed. Glancing up at him, she unveiled her innermost feelings. "I am frightened."

Kelson sat stunned a moment, overtaken by the intensity of her emotion and the blind trust she had just displayed. From his earlier sharings with her, he knew that the act didn't come easily for her. Her spirit, will, and wit had from the very first made him see her only as an excellent queen consort, so that at times he forgot she was two years younger than he, and much more vulnerable. At that moment it was the young, seventeen-year-old maiden with no one to guard or guide her that looked out from those emerald eyes. It took a moment to respond. "Of me?"

"Oh, of Rolf, for Druimfada, for Fergal, of you, of your crown, of Gwynedd. I lied to you before. I am a coward."

Her voice trailed off as Kelson squeezed her tightly. "Hardly," he breathed. "Brave men fear as much as cowards do. The difference is that cowards are ruled by that fear, while brave men face it. If you were a coward, you would not be here. You would be Rolf's pawn, and more than likely his wife."

She shuddered at that image, unconsciously pressing close to Kelson. "I am still frightened," she said stubbornly.

"Why?"

She was silent at first, thinking through the jumble of images and emotions that whirled within. "I have been having evil dreams since I came to Rhemuth, and they are always the same. Rolf takes Druimfada, and my people suffer and die. Fergal does not break faith with Rolf, and dies a traitor. You must focus solely with your duty to Gwynedd, and I am left alone with no purpose for my life."

Pressing a gentle kiss into her hair, Kelson squeezed her lightly. "You think I would ever leave you alone?"

Mairona shivered. "What happens when I displease you, or you tire of me?"

Taken aback, Kelson pulled her face to where he could see it. "I am made of steadier stuff than you seem to think. Your spirit will keep me on my toes so I shall never have time to tire of you."

"No?" Mairona twisted her chin out of his grip and looked back out the windows. "What if the Princess Rothana returned to Rhemuth?"

Kelson stiffened in surprise, then forced himself to relax, finally seeing the root of this whole discussion. "I have chosen you to be my wife, not her," he answered. Her head turned back to meet his gaze.

"Only because she refused. Can you honestly say that she would not be the one sitting with you now if she had been willing?"

"No, I cannot," he whispered. "But she refused me and left."

"And you are still hurt," Mairona accused. Kelson smiled wistfully.

"I am not accustomed to being refused."

"I am not accustomed to being second choice," Mairona retorted.

"You are *not* second choice," Kelson said firmly. "A quirk of fate caused me to meet her first, you second, that is all. Rothana and I were not meant to be. We are."

"I feel so much better now," Mairona said, dripping in sarcasm.

Kelson's breath escaped in an explosion. "What do you want me to say?" he demanded.

"I do not know," she shook her head slowly, looking back at the garden. "I do not know." Sudden pain pierced her skull, and her massive shield wall throbbed in time with this sudden headache. She pressed her hands to her forehead. "This again," she muttered.

"What ails you?" Kelson asked in concern, extending his Deryni senses only to pull back in the wash of pain. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing serious," she replied, rubbing her temples as she willed tense muscles to relax. "I have been getting these headaches since I arrived in Rhemuth. 'Tis the stress and uncertainty, I imagine."

"Let me help," he offered, bringing his hands around to dig firmly into her shoulders. She almost purred her relief as he loosened her knotted muscles with physical and Deryni administration. The pain and throbbing started to fade under his firm touch, which reached up her neck on either side of her spine as he wove his fingers into her hair with a gentler motion. When she could finally banish the headache on her own, she sighed contentedly and moved off his lap to a more comfortable seat at his side, leaning her head on his shoulder.

"Mairona," Kelson nudged. "Do you still fear me?"

"No," she whispered, "but I fear being your queen." Kelson squeezed her affectionately.

"All I can do is promise never to leave you alone," he said.

"Do not make promises you cannot keep," she chided him. "In a month or so you will already be leaving me."

"But I shall not be leaving you alone."

"I wager I could live with that." Mairona entwined her fingers with his. "Just as long as you come home."

Kelson kissed her hair. "You waiting for me will be as strong an incentive as I could have."

"Good."

"Mairona, would you sing for me?" he asked, eyeing the harp across the room.

"I do not need that," she told him, taking a deep breath. She sang a song of a maiden wishing for her wedding day and the joy of going to meet her love bedecked in spring flowers. Her music warmed Kelson's heart, making him long even more for the day they would finally be joined.

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The winds stung like ice in Druimfada, and Fergal ó Hearne had to pull his cloak over his face to keep his breath from freezing on his beard. He had gained the castle courtyard, though, and it was just a short, hurried walk to the hall. The hall that Mairona should be commanding, not Rolf of Tirkeeve. What had happened to her? Rolf had said that Mairona had taken ill in her chambers and wished no one to disturb her, not even Fergal. That was unlike her.

Worried, Fergal made use of the secret passages he and Mairona had played in as children to gain entrance to Mairona's apartments at night. She wasn't there. Discreet inquiries among what few of her men remained yielded no results, since they were too terrified of Rolf's men to talk. Something was very wrong. She had disappeared right before Rolf took most of her men prisoner, and those two events put together didn't sit well with Fergal.

"My Lord Hearne!" someone called from behind. Fergal turned, annoyed that he would now have to stay in the bitter cold even longer.

"Aye," he called impatiently. A short man, one of the few left who had served Mairona, ran to him holding a scroll tube.

"My lord, a royal messenger has arrived from Rhemuth bearing news of the Lady Dugain!" He offered the hard leather tube.

"What?" Fergal breathed, snatching the precious message. "Of Mairona?"

"Aye, my lord," the servingman panted. "I was told this is in her ladyship's hand."

"From Rhemuth?" Fergal asked.

"Aye, my lord."

"Thank you." Fergal dismissed the man, turning back to the promising warmth of the hall. Mairona in Rhemuth? She had welcomed Rolf to Druimfada, planned with him the rising of a new, independent Meara. What the devil was she doing so close to the Haldane demon? And how did the letter get here so quickly? She had only disappeared a few weeks ago. It was impossible to ride to Rhemuth in this weather and then get a message back to Druimfada in such time. But then, this was Mairona. Fergal had learned to expect the impossible from her. So he asked himself the worst question of all—why had she gone to the lion's den without so much as a word of goodbye?

That hurt him deeply, but perhaps the cause was in this letter. Rushing up the stairs, he gratefully entered through the large oak door into the side of the hall, and moved himself close to the fire to dry out cold wet feet. As soon as he gained a seat, he worked the tube open with numb fingers and clumsily fished out the scroll it contained. Unrolling it carefully, he turned it toward the flames so he could see clearly. It was definitely in her own hand, leaving out the formal greetings and salutations that she found so tiresome.

Fergal

I hope you can forgive me for vanishing in the middle of the night, especially in light of the lies Rolf is probably spreading about my absence. He forced

entrance into my bedchamber when I was sleeping and threatened to marry me, by force if necessary, to gain control of Meara. Even if I were willing, you know Meara is not mine to give. My only course of action was to flee to the king, who has offered me protection. He has also offered pardon and protection for any who desert Rolf and swear fealty to the Crown in Rhemuth. I urge you to take advantage of his mercy.

Dear friend, I need your help now to regain Druimfada. The king wishes he could assist immediately, but there is a threat from Torenth that must be addressed when the spring thaw comes, and that will delay his attention. I need you to join me in Rhemuth with your men, and bring any other chieftains you can convince to remain loyal to me and to the Haldane who wears Meara's lawful Crown.

I also need you for a happier occasion. Kelson has asked me to marry him, and I have joyfully accepted. However, I have no family left, and am in need of someone to give me away at my wedding within the month. You have been as a brother to me all my life, and I beg you to come to Rhemuth and perform that duty, as you are the only family I have left.

*Fondest regards,
Mairona*

Fergal almost dropped the letter, he was so stunned. This was not the Mairona he knew. She was going to marry the king? It was obvious she and Rolf had a falling-out, but to flee to the Haldane? Was she so desperate for Meara's crown that she would risk her eternal soul in marriage to that demon? Oh, sweet Brigid, why hadn't he intervened sooner! "Why, Mairona," he whispered, so quietly no one could overhear in the bustle of the hall. "Why could you never see that I love you? You could have come to me, and I would protect you with my life and deliver Meara into your hands. Mairona..."

With a sudden movement, he flung the letter into the fire, both to destroy the unwelcome news and to keep it from ever falling into Rolf's hands. Despite his own personal feelings, his duty was to Mairona, as it always had been, and he must now join her in Rhemuth and play loyal to the king. For her. Always for her. He had done everything for her, and she had never looked upon him as more than a fond brother. That was his own fault, for not being more aggressive in winning her affections. Now, for her, he would make a journey that would more than likely take several weeks this time of year, through the bitter cold and the deepening snow. If he left immediately, he would be hard pressed to get there for the wedding. But maybe it would be better if he missed it.

Silently brooding, he put off deciding how to escape with his men from Rolf's watchful eyes. He would plan tomorrow.