

## ✠ Chapter 14 ✠

Mairona rose from her kneeling position, her knees aching. She had come to terms with Kelson's previous feelings for Rothana, and had to come to the royal crypt to make peace with the memory of Princess Sidana. No. Queen Sidana.

Even though Kelson had never really loved her, Sidana had been his first wife, if only for a few minutes, and that memory had to be put to rest in Mairona's mind. She had garbed herself in a plain tunic-dress to avoid attention, and had come alone to the crypt to pray in front of the young queen's tomb. Attendants would only have distracted her, and she wanted to be left in solitude.

Now the prayers had been said, forgiveness asked of Sidana for usurping what should have been her consort crown. Peace had been made in Mairona's heart, and it was time to leave. Stiffly, she made her way up the stairs and let herself through the gate sealing the crypt from the remainder of the cathedral, turning the lock with a mental nudge. Making her way outdoors to the square, she pulled her plain gray woolen cloak around her for warmth against the softly falling snow.

It had grown dark, and colder. Mairona had spent far longer than she thought or intended down in the crypt, and she was surprised at the passage of time. Saraid would probably be worried about her, and Mairona would bear the full brunt of that worry when she returned. Seánin would be no better, sulking in fury over being left behind.

The square was deserted, and Mairona made her way through the new-fallen snow back to the gate leading through the royal castle's outer walls. The evening meal would be under way in the hall, and the castle's residents would be supping, and the city's inhabitants appeared to be locked up in their own homes, safe and warm indoors from the snow.

Contrary to common sense, a group of five or so men stumbled down the road toward her. They were dressed like soldiers, so they must have come from the meal in the hall, and judging by their appearance, they had been deep in their cups. Most of them hadn't even donned a cloak before going outside into the bitter winter weather, and they were lacking in some coordination. Staggering down the street, they sang a bawdy song about some very disreputable women and what they would like to do with them. Mairona shook her head, moving to the other side of the street to pass as far away from them as possible. They were obviously on their inebriated way to some less-than-respectable tavern for a certain nighttime pleasure.

"Hey, look!" one called, his speech heavily slurred and abnormally loud. "Thersh a pritty girl over there!"

"Where?" another called back, again shouting too loud.

"There!"

Mairona tried to sink into her cloak's hood, quickening her pace to reach earshot of the guard at the inner gatehouse. Maybe she should have brought Seánin after all, but Rhemuth was known far and wide for the safety of its streets. The unsightly gang started toward her, and she rushed even faster, her heart pounding.

"Didn' we come fur pritty girls?" the leader asked his fellows, carefully slurring his speech to appear drunk.

"Aye!" the gang yelled, rushing toward her. Mairona broke into a desperate run, but her skirts were too cumbersome to get any real speed, and the men chasing her easily closed the

distance. Her breath came in ragged, frightened gasps as she tried to will her legs to go even faster.

**KELSON!!!!** she screamed psychically, hoping the sheer force of the panic call would make him hear. One of the forerunners grabbed her arm, spinning her so forcefully that she fell backwards into the fresh snow. She lashed out at him by Deryni means, and thankfully he was just human. Screaming, he clasped his head with his hands as his mind felt an illusion of worms wriggling in his skull, in and out of his ears. Convulsing to the ground, he clawed at his head to scrape out the invisible creatures, and his efforts soon caused blood to run from his nose and ears. The other men backed off, shaken and scared at what just happened to their companion, but their leader kept advancing without hesitation, an evil, lecherous grin on his face. Mairona picked herself off the ground and stood ramrod straight, glaring at him as she put on her most regal bearing.

"Would you dare lay hands on your king's betrothed?" she spat, trusting her words to scare him off.

"You are not my king's betrothed," the man sneered. Mairona sensed him speaking truth, and was angered that he didn't recognize her.

"Move away and let me pass," she ordered, but he kept coming. Gathering herself, she sent a wave of pure destructive energy at him, but he deflected it easily off shields. Now she started to get really frightened.

**HELP!! KELSON!!!! THE CATHEDRAL!!!!** she screamed again, as the man grabbed her, spun her expertly and put her in a chokehold.

"Let go of me, you bastard!" she demanded, pulling at his arm.

"Such ugly words from a pretty lady," he laughed evilly. Mairona grabbed his wrist as Seánin had taught her, twisting it with a forceful yank. The man was forced to give way, or he risked a broken arm. As she dove from him, her mantle's brooch tightened on her neck, and spots danced before her eyes as she coughed heavily. The man had been standing on her cloak, arresting her flight, and he expertly subdued her once more.

Suddenly a golden fire materialized in the sky, approaching and shimmering as it coalesced into a flaming, mythical griffin that dove for Mahon. He was unimpressed, and the illusion disintegrated as it fell right through him. Nonchalantly, he drew a dagger and held it at her neck.

"Now I will have no more of your Deryni powers, my lady, or I will be forced to use this. Do you understand?"

She nodded, growing more horrified as she caught a gleeful spillover from his shields, more than likely a deliberate, overconfident move meant to terrify her. It worked. They had all appeared drunk at first, but this man Mahon wasn't. While he had been acting as inebriated as his fellows, he was quite sober, and he had recognized the "pritty girl" trying so hard not to attract attention. He was on duty in the hall when she arrived at Rhemuth, and had watched closely at the feast where the king started courting her. Mahon saw a rich reward from his Torenthi master gleaming in front of his eyes, if he could deflower the Haldane's intended bride. Possibly even kill her, depending on how much she struggled and what mood he was in. There was no escape for her, for with the dagger at her neck he could kill her before she could struggle free, and he was a well-trained Deryni that couldn't be taken psychically when he was holding that same dagger.

"Kelson will kill you," she spat.

"He will have to catch me first," Mahon sneered. "And I shall have a pretty prize to bargain with, lady. Though I wonder what value you will have to his Highness when I am through with you."

Mairona closed her eyes against her worst fear, which he had so maliciously voiced. She would rather die. This was the one thing she feared above all else, why she had abandoned her home. To be left, violated and stripped of all honor... Her only hope was for Kelson to come, and come soon. She was helpless, and her panic grew. Deep within her shields her mind churned, sorting through all the training Halek gave her. There were lessons on how to operate the mind on many levels, each one masking the other. She had done well in training, but had never attempted this difficult effort when her life depended on her success. That was disrupting her ability to focus, and her outer shields started failing, leaving her open to a Deryni attack. If Mahon killed her, she would never see Kelson again. If he succeeded in raping her, and didn't kill her, her entire life would be ruined. Kelson needed a virgin bride, and— "No," she whimpered, starting to cry. Kelson would be lost, either way. In her panic, she started blindly broadcasting her fear, horror and anguish. She had dared to share in Kelson's dream, despite her better judgement, and it was now violently snatched from her grasp.

If she didn't gain control of her shields, she would be open to more than just physical desecration. Struggling to reinforce her inner shields and create an inner sanctuary, she scrapped together enough training to force all the terror and horror to the surface, allowing it to broadcast blindly in her rising panic. It seemed to affect Mahon, who clamped down behind tight shields to block out the intense fear she was radiating, fear that could disrupt his own thought. It didn't stop him from dragging her down a side street away from the public square, his friends following close behind with a new courage at Mahon's control over her. Taking in a frayed breath, Mairona battled her tears back down and started reciting Psalms to keep the panic at bay.

*Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings from the violence of the wicked. My ravenous enemies press upon me; they close their hearts. Their steps even now encircle me; they watch closely, keeping low to the ground, like lions eager for prey, like young lions lurking in ambush. Rise, O Lord, confront and cast them down; rescue me so from the wicked. Slay them with your sword; with your hand, Lord, slay them; snatch them from the world in their prime.*

Tears poured down her cheeks as she was forced further away from the safety of the royal keep.

*Kelson, can you hear me??? Where are you???*

\* \* \* \* \*

Kelson left his hall accompanied by Dhugal, Morgan, and his Uncle Nigel. Mairona hadn't come to the evening meal, and he hoped she wasn't feeling poorly. He would have to check on her before retiring for the night.

"Worry, worry, worry," Dhugal teased, picking up on Kelson's thoughts. "Knowing her, she is probably lost in the library and never even noticed the sun go down as she read her histories."

"I am certain you are right," Kelson agreed, glancing up at the window that concealed his book treasures. "Morgan, it seems your wife will have some help tracking down the elusive St. Camber."

"They have already been working together," the duke replied, smiling. "That is, when they are not occupied with wedding plans."

Kelson grinned. "Only two weeks to go before I am an old married man like you and my uncle." He nodded over at Nigel. "Now we just have to take care of my dear brother, here. You know, Dhugal, I have been introduced to a few of Richenda's cousins who are quite lovely. Princesses, even."

"Don't you start trying to marry me off now, Kelson!" Dhugal interjected.

"Oh, but you are the most powerful unmarried man in Gwynedd, under me. Cassan and Kierney need an heir or two," Kelson teased.

"If you think I want your cast-offs—"

Dhugal was cut off by a curt motion of the king's hand. Kelson stopped stiff, closing his eyes to concentrate better as Dhugal and Morgan picked up a bit of the psychic echo that had been aimed at the king.

"No," Kelson breathed as a pit opened in his stomach. "Mairona—" The memory he had read three years ago during the Mearan War of Princess Janniver's rape sprung to mind, with all the terror and anguish she had suffered. A lump constricted his throat as Janniver became Mairona, helpless and hopeless. Suddenly he lifted his head, going into action. "She needs help at the cathedral! Dhugal, get my sword and meet me in the stables. Go quickly! Morgan, you and your concealed weaponry are with me. Uncle, get a company of soldiers and meet us in the cathedral square."

Nigel didn't even have time to give acknowledgement before Kelson was running toward the stables. Morgan followed just a few steps behind, thinking how incredibly foolish this was for the king go out, virtually unarmed, but Mairona's safety was involved. He knew there would be no reasoning with the king, and the best thing would be to go along and keep Kelson out of trouble. At least he managed to wave about a dozen guardsmen to accompany them.

Once the king reached the stables, he made the grooms frantic over saddling war chargers that he demanded. Unable to just sit and watch while Mairona suffered, Kelson fumbled with the bridle of his own mount, impatiently coaxing the bit into Besieger's mouth as Morgan adjusted the girth of his saddle to his liking. After what seemed like an eternity, Dhugal arrived with the Haldane sword and his own blade, along with another sword for Morgan. Soon the trio was mounted, accompanied by the usurped guards, and racing out the inner gatehouse to the cathedral square.

Which was empty. "Damn!" Kelson exploded, suppressing imminent tears. He forced himself to focus, reaching out to touch her somehow.

"Do not waste time. There are tracks," Morgan told him.

"There is more than one set!" the king yelled impatiently.

"But only one leading from a struggle," the duke pointed out. Kelson just about slapped himself for not noticing. He kicked his charger instead, wheeling it down a side street after the tracks to canter recklessly, leaving the cobblestoned courtyard for the muddy passage of one of Rhemuth's lesser streets. Luckily, everyone had stayed indoors because of the falling snow, and there were only one group's footprints down here. They turned off down another narrow by-way, and here Kelson could hear a gang of men's voices jeering and laughing. And a terrified scream that was quickly muffled. His dinner threatened to return unpleasantly as he thought of the things they might be doing to her.

The king finally caught up to them in a dark alley where they had taken their "pretty girl." Mairona had been thrown to the ground, and one of the men was holding a dagger to her throat. One of the sleeves had been torn off her gown, her lip was bleeding, her wrist swollen, and she looked like her whole world was crashing down around her in little pieces.

"Stop this immediately!" Kelson demanded, drawing his sword. The men had already turned to the sound of approaching hoof beats, and they recognized the king. The humans backed off from Mairona, suddenly facing their doom, but Mahon didn't surrender that easily. Mairona saw Kelson, and a glimmer of desperate hope crept into her eyes.

"How do you intend to get her back?" Mahon said scornfully, not willing to give up his prize so easily. Suddenly there was a mortal scream, and one of the men beside him fell down with a stiletto protruding from his throat. The humans hadn't seen where the dagger came from, and assumed it was part of the Haldane powers. Panicking, they flattened themselves against a back wall that turned the alley into a dead-end. Only Mahon had seen Morgan's hand flicker as the dagger was thrown, and he knew that if the king hadn't been in the way, that dagger would be in him. He was trapped, but all was not yet lost. If he could keep them off-balance long enough he had a chance.

"Another move and she dies," he challenged. Mairona looked at Kelson, her haunted eyes pleading for help in their despair. He had to tear his gaze away before her fear distracted him.

"What do you want?" the king asked quietly, working hard to keep his rage in check.

Mahon yanked Mairona to her feet, still keeping the dagger at her neck. Now she was between him and any instrument of death. "I want safe passage from Rhemuth, and I will take a hostage as surety that I get it. No Deryni tricks. I will know, and she will die." At Mahon's mention of keeping her as hostage, Mairona closed her eyes. Tears fell from between her lashes.

*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why so far from my call for help, from my cries of anguish? My God, I call by day, but you do not answer; by night, but I have no relief. Please, my God, let me die instead, and take me into Your loving embrace.*

Mahon did not like the king's silence. "Would you prefer a dead bride?" he asked.

"Dhugal, clear a way for him at the city gate," Kelson commanded, backing his charger away.

"What?!" the border duke exploded.

"Do not question me. Go, damn it!" Kelson prayed that Dhugal would realize he didn't intend to let Mahon out of Rhemuth alive, but he wasn't going to risk Mairona's life by attempting to communicate through Deryni means, just in case Mahon's boast wasn't false.

"Aye, Sire." Dhugal wheeled his horse and trotted down the street to the gate. When he was just out of sight, he turned down a side street and planned to make his way back to meet with Nigel's guards. If Kelson really intended him to clear Mahon's way, he would be very angry, but Dhugal didn't think the king would give in that easily. There had to be something he was missing, and since he wasn't sure what the king intended, Dhugal decided to guide the soldiers to the alley he had just left.

Dhugal met them just as Nigel led the company to the cathedral square. "Your Highness," he called, cantering to the prince's side. "We have found the Lady Mairona, and her kidnapper is using her as a hostage to get to the city gate. We should split up and try to surround them."

Prince Nigel nodded agreement. "Tell me where to go and I will give you half my men."