

✠ Chapter 17 ✠

Mairona and Kelson met again just outside the great hall, as he had requested of her. The king had dressed as he customarily did for trials, in border-style leathers dyed a rich, dark crimson, and matching boots that seemed to blend into his breeches. The crown on his head was slightly more than an elaborate circlet, an ancient design that probably predated the Festillic invasion of Gwynedd. It was almost crudely worked, set over hard, steely eyes. Mairona shuddered at the general impression of bloodthirstiness that he conveyed. At that moment he was very much the powerful King of Gwynedd, and he frightened her. *I will not be afraid of you*, she repeated to herself, but she was. It had been alright earlier when they were breaking their fast, but then he was simply Kelson Haldane, her loving husband-to-be. Now he was a vengeful king, and she was very afraid.

Kelson brushed against her mind, but she was heavily shielded. Her inner turmoil was all over her face, and he knew she was in no condition to face not only the men who had abducted her but the entire court as well. He had to pull her out of this quickly, for this was no way for his court to see their future queen just two weeks before she was crowned consort. She struggled to maintain her composure, and if he made her this nervous she'd fall apart during the trial. He watched her take a deep breath before she lowered her eyes to the ground and curtsied very formally.

"Come now, my lady," the king bade, taking her hand to help her rise. "This show is for traitors to be brought to justice, not my beloved bride." His expression softened as she met his gaze, holding her breath. She had chosen to be daring in appearance as well. Her dress was simple, a subdued green with little ornament that fell modestly from her shoulders, which were covered by an equally plain cloak. That was all within the realm of propriety. However, the coronet she had donned for the court was by no means simple. It had belonged to her father, his fathers before, and it denoted the rank of Baron. The claim was controversial, for the title had been bestowed by a Mearan king and was never confirmed by the Haldanes. It would also stir up rumblings in his court, for although Mearan traditional law allowed a daughter to inherit a title, Gwyneddi law did not. That coronet gave Kelson an idea. Perhaps he could help her find her strength through anger.

"Why?" Kelson asked simply, glancing meaningfully at the coronet. Mairona almost started trembling at the look in his eyes.

"Among my people, I am Baroness," she said quietly, gathering herself and lifting her chin.

"A title which was neither given nor confirmed by the lawful Haldane kings," he reminded her, staring closely. "Your claim to that title could be construed as support of previous pretenders, and your own claim to an independent Meara."

She averted her eyes as tears threatened to brim over. "If you wish, I will remove it," she whispered, but she also reached out psychically. *Will you leave me no dignity before my captors?* she pleaded. *Why are you doing this to me?*

Kelson's eyes immediately turned compassionate. This avenue only upset her, and now he would have to undo the damage. "I am sorry." He reached out to lift her chin, turning her face back to meet his. "I cannot recognize a title granted by an unlawful monarch who warred with my ancestors."

"But my father and my grandfather both swore fealty to Gwynedd, and remained true to their oaths!" she protested. "Does that mean nothing?"

"They did serve the Crown loyally," Kelson said, "and so have you. That is why I will confer the rank of Baroness on you today, according to Mearan law."

Mairona almost gaped at him. If her father had been installed as Baron by a Haldane king, and then the respective rank had been conferred to her on her father's death, that would be one thing. But to confirm the title initially with a woman, that was something unheard of, even in Meara.

"Do not look so surprised," Kelson grinned. "Druimfada is yours, whether you are called its Baroness or not, and the title can be passed to our younger sons. Once I crown you Queen Consort, the rank of Baroness will matter little."

"Thank you," she breathed, removing the coronet from her head. Kelson took it from her and passed it to his squire, Dolfin. A few blond curls tumbled forward on her face now that they were no longer held in place, but she brushed them back as Kelson moved to appear before the entrance to the hall. Before he was visible in the doorway he turned back.

"Well?" he asked Mairona, holding out his hand.

"We are not yet wed," she told him. "I should appear behind you."

"Have you let them take your strength, your fire?" he asked her, his eyes hardening. A flicker of hatred and indignation shone in her eyes, but she kept back. It was a start. "I do hope that malice was directed at my former soldiers, not me," he said, a slight smile on his lips. "Now stop arguing and take my hand. The nature of what occurred last night will have led to questions about your suitability as my bride. You are beyond reproach, but many may not yet know that. I will show that I still favor you, and give you my support. Come. Let us face this trial together."

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Mairona rested her fingers on his. She lowered her shields for him, and he was almost overwhelmed by the chaos of emotion boiling within her. It was amazing she was functioning at all. Very gently and unobtrusively, he helped her calm and center. She smiled briefly at him.

"It seems I have a bit to learn from your training, as well," she whispered.

"Tis experience, not training. Come, my Baroness. The court awaits."

Mairona composed her face before they appeared together to a flourish of horns. More than a few courtiers showed surprise that the king would choose to enter with her on his arm, but that surprise was quickly hidden as heads were lowered to the floor in bows and curtsies. Kelson kept his head high and gaze forward as he processed to the dais and his throne, but Mairona's head bowed occasionally as she stole sidelong glances at the nobles.

Stand proud, Kelson sent, glancing over at her.

I do not like the way they are looking at me, she replied, keeping her eyes trained on the floor.

Are you your father's daughter? he returned. She glared at him. *In two weeks you will be my queen, so start acting like one. Keep your back straight, your head erect, and LOOK FORWARD!*

Furious, Mairona schooled her face with effort to a serious expression and trained her eyes on the throne. This was unbelievable.

Why are you torturing me? she shot to Kelson. *I did not commit the crime last night!*

Kelson returned a brief smile. *When we entered this hall, you looked like a frightened deer. Now you are someone to be reckoned with, and my people will not take you so lightly.*

Mairona almost stopped in surprise. She wasn't accustomed to being manipulated like that, and he had played her very well. Taking a deep breath, she crossed the rest of the distance to the dais on the king's arm, moving with statuesque grace as she walked in front of the royal court. She was Mairona ní Dhugain, Lady of Druimfada, and she was not controlled by her fear.

When Kelson reached his throne, he released Mairona's hand and turned to face his court. She curtsied deeply to him and moved beside the great wooden chair, noticing gratefully that Richenda was next to her. Kelson recited the appropriate words of greeting to his court, but Mairona barely knew what he was saying as she leaned on Richenda's emotional support.

Stand tall and proud, my future queen, the duchess sent. Mairona smiled gratefully.

I never wanted to be queen, she returned. *Life in Druimfada is much less exciting. One is bound to live longer in its walls.*

Richenda smiled as they glanced at each other, then they turned their attention back on the king's speech. "We wish to make clear the status of the Lady Mairona ní Dhugain's lands. Druimfada was granted as a barony by a Mearan king, but Gwynedd has never affirmed that claim. However, both Oisin and Tiernan of Druimfada swore oaths of fealty to Gwynedd and remained loyal to their word. They were granted Druimfada for themselves and their offspring, but that land came with no rank.

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This seems a crime, my lords. The nobility of the house of Dugain is unquestionable, for they are descended from a cadet branch of the old Mearan royals. Perhaps that is why they were never titled by Gwynedd, but shortly the Dugain heiress will be bound to us in marriage, and then future loyalty will be no matter of concern. We cannot redress the wrong done to the Lords Oisin or Tiernan in spite of their loyal service, but their rightful reward may be granted on Tiernan's daughter and heir by Mearan law." A steady murmur of surprise rippled down the hall as Kelson turned to face his betrothed, who was looking considerably stronger than when she entered the hall. "Mairona ní Dhugain, kneel before your king."

Looking very dignified despite the smile playing on her lips, Mairona moved slowly in front of the throne. With Meraude and Richenda's help, she lowered herself to her knees. Placing her hands in Kelson's, she recited the oath of fealty then touched his hands to her forehead in homage as so many of Druimfada's men had done to her. As his fingers touched her face a link surged across the contact, stunning both of them in its spontaneity.

She saw herself through his loving eyes, almost glowing in a pool of sun spilling from the windows high overhead. He understood her precarious emotional balance, and was working very hard to keep her from retreating into her shields and her inner self. *Your fire and determination are what will make you an ideal consort for Gwynedd's king,* he sent her. *Do not let them die.* In answer she let her aura flare around her hair, a golden fire playing over her head in the sun.

I am Mairona ní Dhugain of Druimfada, she told him. *I will fight my fear.*

Kelson smiled as a scarlet glow flickered around his crown. There was a hush as all the king's court beheld the glimmering colors of the royal house, crimson shining over gold. The king opened himself to Mairona's vision, and he was watching the proceedings through her, kneeling on the Kheldish carpet as she looked up at a man who was every inch a king. Despite all that had come to pass between her and that king, deep inside she held him in awe.

Underneath the crown is simply a man, with a man's dreams, faults, and desires, he told her.

But he is no simple man, she returned, *and I love you hopelessly.*

My love is no less than yours, my Deryni Baroness-Queen, he smiled, taking the Druimfada coronet from Dolfin's hands. It was laid gently on Mairona's brow. "Rise, Mairona Baroness of Druimfada," his voice rang. She came to her feet, removing herself to his right to clear the way for the horrid event ahead. The king's face turned frightfully hard as he sat in his throne.

"Now we must move to less pleasant business. As you have heard, last night we rescued our new baroness from dishonor and possibly death at the hands of Torenti spies. Morgan, bring in the prisoners!"

Kelson watched Mairona very carefully at the side of his vision. As the doors opened and four bound men were marched in chains she stood very erect, eyes flashing and staring at the men as if she could bore them down through the floor. Relieved, Kelson turned his full attention and a frightful gaze to the prisoners being forced to their knees in his presence. Mairona would handle this just fine.