

❖ Chapter 19 ❖

Fergal ó Hearne arrived in Rhemuth much sooner than he expected or wanted. The weather had held reasonably well as he journeyed with his men, and he entered the city gates just three days before the royal wedding. The Rhemuth guard was understandably suspicious of this Mearan riding with a sizable armed force, so his eighty men were required to wait outside the city walls as Fergal was given an "honor" escort to the royal keep.

Rhemuth was huge, larger than any city he had ever seen. Mairona must have been impressed when she rode through it. Was that why she decided to marry the king, after avoiding wedlock for so long? Could it be his wealth and power? She would find the power attractive, but being the Queen Consort would force her into the subservient role she had always despised. It just didn't make sense. Unless she was marrying him out of fear for Rolf— No, that wasn't right either. She was safe from Rolf in Rhemuth, and Mairona did not allow fear to motivate her actions. Perhaps the king saw a need for an alliance with Meara, and offered marriage as a price for regaining Druimfada. Mairona would accept, and even act like she wanted to marry if it were for the good of her lands. Or perhaps the demon king had bespelled her with his evil Haldane powers.

He had to see her, but first his soldier escort made him wait in the great hall while their leader checked with the king. "Forgive me, my lord," the man had apologized, "but an attempt was made on the baroness' life a little over a week ago. The king has issued strict orders to guarantee her safety."

"What?" Fergal stared intently at the guard, shock registering on his face. "Is the Lady Mairona alright?"

"She is, my lord, and the men involved were hanged the very next day. If my lord will excuse me." The man bowed and left, anxious to perform his duty.

Somebody had tried to harm Mairona! Dear God, if Rolf or the Haldane had sent someone to harm her in any way, he would pay to an earthly justice as well as a heavenly one. Fergal would see to that. "You there!" he called to another guard watching attentively over him. "You. What happened to the Lady Dugain?"

The guard glanced at his fellows. "A Torenthi spy," he started, turning his head aside to spit at the hated phrase, "tried to rape her."

"O Dear Lord," Fergal breathed in horror. A man tried to rape her, just as Rolf had threatened to do if Mairona didn't accept his marriage "proposal." He might very well have orchestrated this whole thing. There were so many Torenthi crawling around Druimfada now that there must be a connection, if only he could figure out where— but he was cut off by a delighted voice across the hall.

"Fergal!" Mairona rushed up, deftly avoiding servants busily preparing for the next meal. She almost attacked her old friend with an affectionate embrace. "Fergal, I was beginning to think you would not come for my wedding. Why, all my advisors would be crawling all over each other to finally see me married!"

"The weather—"

"Oh, of course," she interrupted, releasing him so she could take a good look at him. "Well, you do not look too much the worse for that horrid winter travel. Come, we can sit by the fire and warm you up while we talk." Looping her arm through his, she started to pull him away before the guard Henry stopped her, unsure of what to do.

"Pardon me, my lady, but my captain was checking with the king, since he is a Mearan—"

"As am I. Does that make me dangerous?" Mairona raised an eyebrow.

"No, my lady, but—"

"Fergal is an old friend and my vassal," she reassured him. "He was fostered at Druimfada as a boy. He is safe."

"But his Highness' orders are very clear, my lady," Henry protested, still blocking their way.

"If his Highness objects, he can take it up with me. Come, Fergal." She pulled him around Henry to the fire. The poor guard could only watch after them, shaking his head.

Once near the fire, Mairona bent to help Fergal drag a bench closer, but two serving girls rushed up, curtsying. "We will do that, my lady," one said as they both pushed the bench up.

"Thank you," Mairona smiled graciously. "My friend here has had a long journey and could use refreshments. See what you can find in the kitchen, and have a flask of wine brought."

"Aye, my lady."

"Very good," Mairona concluded. The two girls turned away to obey their mistress, so Fergal and Mairona were finally allowed to sit down in relative peace.

"I see the servants in Rhemuth already adore you," Fergal said.

"What?" Mairona laughed, then shook her head. "They are just trying to ingratiate themselves with the king's bride."

"As are the guards," he muttered sarcastically, looking over at the company who had escorted him in, still standing at the entrance and watching him very carefully.

"Kelson is nervous about my safety," she replied. Fergal couldn't help but notice the glint in her eye as she spoke the king's name.

"After the attack?"

"You heard." She turned her eyes to the fire crackling in front of them for a moment, then returned her gaze to Fergal. "Kelson assigned a personal guard to me after that incident. They follow whenever I leave the castle's inner walls."

"He is keeping watch on you and you agreed?" Fergal shifted to get his numb feet closer to the fire. "You would never tolerate that in Druimfada."

"I would not have been attacked in Druimfada," she stated emphatically. "Things are different here. The king has many more enemies than I did alone. Six more Torenthi spies were found the next day, but they had taken their own lives, so we learned nothing of their further intentions."

"And this is how you choose to live?" He studied her closely. "You are giving up your freedom! Druimfada is too far and isolated from Rhemuth for the king to be concerned about us. You are Druimfada's lady, and need answer to none. I know you did not give that up easily. What has the king done to convince you to do this?"

"What has he done?" she laughed incredulously, wishing she knew what was bothering him. It would be so much easier to just Read him, but he had made her promise not to without his express permission years ago. It was a frustrating promise, mostly because she couldn't understand why he almost feared her abilities, but it was one she had no intentions of breaking. That left her with no more tools than a mere human to read him, and that involved a lot of talking. "The king has done nothing more than honorably seek my hand in marriage. Where is the wrong in that?"

"So have many other men, Mairona, and you refused all of them."

"I did not love any of them," she returned.

"And you love the king? That is what makes the difference?"

"Aye," she said simply. Fergal felt as if he had been struck in the gut, but he kept his reaction very controlled. So the king had ensorcelled her. Mairona noticed Fergal's cloak was wet from melting snow and reached over to take it off and lay it by the fire. "What is the matter with you?" she continued when she sat again. "Why all the suspicion?"

Fergal sighed, moving the rushes strewn on the floor into little circles with his boot. "You never wanted to marry before. The whole idea of vowing yourself to subservience used to make you go into raving fits at your advisors. Now you are betrothed to the one man who could force you to marry, and I know that if you decided this was for the good of Druimfada you would even pretend you loved him. You are good enough that you might even fool a Deryni. Or perhaps his Haldane powers have overcome you."

"Fergal, I am not pretending," she insisted harshly, "and my training is so vastly superior to his that he could not coerce me without my knowledge or consent."

"Are you certain?"

"I swear on my father's memory," she replied solemnly. "Now, would I forswear that?"

"No," he almost whispered, looking down at the rushes he had piled up in round mounds. "I believe you."

They were interrupted as the serving girls brought the food and wine Mairona requested, setting it up on a table within easy reach. "Thank you," Mairona smiled to them.

"Will there be anything else, my lady?" one asked, curtsying.

"No, that is fine. Go tend to your other duties."

"Aye, my lady." The two girls curtsied and left again. Fergal dug into the food ravenously, barely remembering his court manners.

"Fergal, you look like you have not eaten in a week!" Mairona exclaimed.

"You try supplying eighty men under Rolf's nose. All we had was stale bread and cheese." Stuffing a cut of meat into his mouth, he looked curiously as Mairona's eyes unfocused slightly. He'd seen that look many times, when Mairona communicated silently with Saraid using her magic, but a quick sweep of the hall showed she wasn't here. Another Deryni, then. There were rumors that the king's court had ten Deryni to each human.

Mairona's eyes refocused and she gave Fergal a small smile. "What is it?" he asked, chewing with his mouth open.

"Improve your manners. Kelson just entered the hall and he is on his way over here."

"The . . . king?" he exclaimed, remembering just in time to take out the *demon* description. "Now?" Swallowing too quickly, he almost choked.

"Aye, now," she chuckled. "Do not fret so, he will not harm you. One of the guards informed him of your arrival, and he wanted to greet you personally." She laughed as Fergal frantically picked a few crumbs of food from his brown beard and adjusted his travel-worn riding leathers.

Fergal's first impression of the king was not the glowering, smoke-spewing, evil, short-cropped overdressed noble that he expected. Kelson's black hair was pulled back in a border braid of all things, tied with a simple crimson lace. He wore a fine but plain tunic, the same color as the lace in his hair, and a simple fur-lined cloak, its hem embroidered with the tiny told lions rampant that marked the ruling branch of the House of Haldane. This man was only twenty years old, but he looked far older than Fergal had envisioned. A large ruby flashed in the king's ear, that and about three rings the only jewelry he wore. There wasn't even a circlet on his head, but something about him left no doubt that he was the king, not even when his face lit into a smile as he bent to kiss Mairona's cheek, his eyes softening into a warm glow. Fergal understood that glow, which had nothing to do with evil, and knew at that instant that King Kelson of Gwynedd loved Mairona very much. She had that same gleam in her eye, radiant as he had never seen her as the two exchanged greetings. Her hands somehow became entwined in the king's as she turned partially toward Fergal.

"Kelson, this is Fergal ó Hearne, who was fostered at Druimfada as a child."

Fergal dropped to one knee, bowing his head. "Sire," he almost whispered, feeling an uncontrollable awe in this man's presence.

"Please, rise," the king bade. "Mairona has told me you are like a brother to her, and any man she would call brother is welcome at my court."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Fergal murmured, keeping his eyes downcast as he got to his feet.

"As long as he does not follow those who would oppose me," Kelson added sternly.

"Mairona is my liege lady, Sire. My loyalties lay with hers."

"I see," the king replied, looking at Fergal carefully.

Mairona placed her hand on the king's arm with a tender smile. "Kelson, do not frighten him more than he already is. When I told him you were coming, the food almost fell out of his mouth. You can be a very imposing figure."

"Indeed?" Kelson grinned at her. Fergal turned bright red, struggling to retain some dignity. "Mairona, I think you do your friend a disservice. My lord Fergal, will you join us in my chambers?" The king offered his hand with a disarming smile.

"Aye, Sire," he replied, grasping the hand. It had been offered as a friendly gesture, but Fergal bowed and touched it to his forehead in homage.

"Good. Perhaps you could inform me how to keep this fiery Mearan maid under control?" Kelson shot Mairona a playful look, then turned his attention back to Fergal.

"I regret I cannot. My lord already seems to know better than I."

"Ah, well, pity" Kelson sighed remorsefully. "We shall find conversation aplenty. I am certain Mairona will want to know about Druimfada."

"Aye, your Lordship."

Fergal followed them up to the king's apartments, unsure what to make of the man. This was no demon who smiled so easily and gazed at his lady in unselfish adoration. He was very intriguing with the personable nature he had extended despite the aura of sheer power he conveyed. Maybe that's what had ensnared Mairona, for she loved to be intrigued. Whatever the reason, she was obviously happy and Fergal couldn't find any reason that the king would be unworthy of her. If anything, Mairona had finally met her match. Putting a suitable smile on his face, Fergal made proper small conversation as they mounted the steps to the king's tower rooms.