

✠ Chapter 20 ✠

Mairona was restless in her new rooms. She had been moved into the queen's apartments earlier that day in preparation for the wedding on the morrow, and she felt like a tiny seed rattling in the cavernous space of a dried-out vegetable. They were spacious, and the sitting room extended over the hall below with deep, recessed windows that had a lovely view of the gardens, but they were foreign and too big. They came with being Queen Consort, though, and being queen came with Kelson. She was beginning to understand why some ladies chose to be mistresses of powerful men rather than wives. Marrying Kelson would bring her great joy, but becoming his queen was something else entirely. From now on she would have to watch what she said, what she did, and with whom she was seen. She couldn't even leave the castle anymore without an entire retinue following close at her heels.

She had just come from the solar, where the ladies of the court had been celebrating the impending royal marriage. Mairona's face had been merry enough, and she laughed at all the appropriate jokes, but she was feeling very moody inside and couldn't figure out why. She was very fortunate, marrying not only the king, but a kind and gentle man who loved her. Whom she loved as well. Excusing herself from the ladies' company as soon as was proper, she retreated to her new rooms with the more intimate company of Richenda, Meraude, Gwenhwyfar, and Saraid.

The four of them were ranged about Mairona, who sat on one of the cushioned benches in a window recess, her feet propped up on the opposite seat and her head leaning against the glass. Her fingers played with a gold brooch which had been a gift from the Queen Mother earlier that day. That was a shock.

Jehana had come to her as she was praying in her new private chapel. That was one privilege she did enjoy having; a place to pray and meditate with little chance of disturbance. At Druimfada there was a family chapel, but that served the whole castle and was rarely empty for very long. Hopefully this chapel could be a refuge where she could be reasonably certain of solitude.

Intent on her prayer, she almost hadn't noticed the older queen slip in and kneel beside her. "Madam," she had whispered, turning her head sideways.

"I would like to pray in my old chapel, if you do not mind," Jehana said. She was nervous, her movements jerky as she folded her hands.

"You are always welcome here, Madam," Mairona told her.

The Queen Mother didn't reply, but bowed her head in an attitude of prayer. Mairona did likewise, returning to her supplication.

*Lord grant that I may be a good and understanding wife to Kelson.
I wish to make him happy. Lord and I know it will be no easy task.
Give me the strength and wisdom to be a queen worthy of him.*

At the edge of her consciousness Mairona felt a light, tentative probe. So Jehana had decided to use her powers! That was intriguing. Keeping her awareness of the touch at a shielded, interior level, Mairona allowed the queen to scan as much as she wished. Jehana did a fearful surface examination and then withdrew behind tightly shuttered shields, burying her face in her hands. Unwilling to disturb the queen, Mairona forced herself back to prayer, for if Jehana knew that Mairona had been aware of her probe she might retreat behind the wall of self-denial that she was only beginning to surmount.

"You love my son?" It was halfway between a question and a statement.

"Yes, my lady, very much." Mairona glanced over and watched Jehana pull her hands away from her face. She looked very pale, but the sad smile that crept on her lips almost softened the harsh, bony lines of her cheeks.

"I suppose I have always known he would marry another Deryni," she whispered, looking up at the crucifix hanging on the wall. "I returned from seclusion at St. Giles to find Kelson a proper, human wife. I should have known he would never listen to me."

An awkward silence followed. Mairona knew she should say something, but couldn't find any words that would make a suitable reply. Bowing her head for a moment, she breathed a silent prayer to St. Camber for patience, then lifted her head to speak the only words that came to mind. "Madam, I know you do not approve of me, but I promise I will do my best to be a good daughter to you."

"Even when I have hated what you are for my entire life?"

"Even so, Madam. 'Honor thy mother and thy father.' I have no family left, my lady, so Kelson's mother must be my own as well."

Jehana stared closely at Mairona, who looked so young at that moment. She was strong, though, and very determined. Exactly the kind of girl that would suit Kelson. Jehana might like her as well, if—

The old queen fumbled to remove a pouch from her belt, then handed it to her daughter-to-be. "This has belonged to Haldane queens for generations. It must be yours now."

Mairona didn't even have time to open the scarlet velvet pouch or murmur a word of thanks before Jehana had fled the chapel. That pouch contained the delicate golden lion brooch she now fingered as she sat in her cushioned window seat. There were many memories bound in the brooch, most of them recent since Jehana was Deryni. Scenes of Brion, who had loved his queen before she had been corrupted by extremist views of Deryni evil, and of her immense love for Kelson as a boy. Now Mairona's memories would be added to those before it was passed on, hopefully to another Deryni who would appreciate it fully.

"My lady," Saraid called, disturbing Mairona from her musings. "My lady, you have been worrying at that brooch all night." *Your mind should be on other things other than Queen Jehana*, she added silently, so the others wouldn't hear. "Shall I put it away?"

"Here." Mairona dropped it into Saraid's waiting hand. "I shall wear it on the morrow, so see it is put with the rest of the jewels." Saraid departed for another room.

"You are awfully thoughtful, my dear," Meraude said, leaning forward.

"Tomorrow will change my life forever," Mairona said, tracing the lines of the window ledge. "Being queen may not be as heavy a burden as the one Kelson must carry, but it is greater than anything I have ever done. It is not a position to be taken lightly." She glanced at Meraude, who was frowning in concern. "I am merely tired," Mairona smiled, shaking her head. "I did not sleep soundly last night."

Comprehension flooded Meraude's face as she broke into a grin. "You are nervous."

"Who would not be?" Mairona pushed back a lock of hair that fell in her face, hooking it around her ear, then smiled. "I am happy, do not fear, but earlier in the solar some of the ladies were infuriatingly persistent. I have more on my mind than how well Kelson will perform his husbandly duties tomorrow night." Her skin burned red, so she turned to the window to hide her face.

Meraude and Richenda exchanged looks, then Meraude let out a noisy yawn. "Ah, me," she sighed. "'Tis time I should be going to bed if I am to wake early enough to see my little daughter Eirian is prepared and behaving herself."

"Good night." Mairona smiled and rose to embrace Meraude. "I am very blessed to be gaining you as an aunt."

"Likewise, my queen. You will make Kelson happy and proud, I know." Dimples indented Meraude's rosy cheeks as she kissed her niece-to-be. "Have Richenda make certain you sleep well."

"I shall."

"Gwenhwyfar, will you attend me?" Meraude asked.

"Aye, my lady," the girl replied, jumping up to follow the duchess. "Good night, Mairona," she said joyfully, flattered and proud that the king's aunt would ask for her company. Mairona smiled at them both as they made for the door. When the latch had clicked home firmly behind them, she took up her place again on the window seat. "What were you two plotting?" she asked Richenda as she resettled.

"Plotting, my lady?" Richenda asked, raising an eyebrow.

Mairona chuckled, tilting her head back to rest in a corner of the window embrasure. "If that was not a planned exit, I am not Deryni."

Smiling awkwardly, Richenda chose her words carefully. "Ah, well. Brides have questions about what will happen in the nuptial chamber, and Meraude felt you may be more comfortable talking to me."

"Really?" Mairona laughed, bringing her feet around and tucking them underneath her. "I should have guessed. I do know what happens, Richenda. Saraid showed me the memory of her wedding night when she first came into my service."

"Saraid was married?" Richenda leaned forward in interest.

"Aye, and still is, though she wishes otherwise. We Deryni are still greatly feared in some parts of Meara. She was wed to a chieftain's son who was not happy to discover his new bride was not merely human. When she failed to conceive, he had the excuse he needed to throw her out of his household. Her father would not have her back, so I took her into my service." Mairona grimaced at the memories Saraid had tearfully shown her three years ago. It had not been a happy marriage by any means.

"That does not sound like a memory to ease a bride's fears."

"No, 'tis not," Mairona sighed. "It probably makes it worse, even though I know Kelson would never do that. Why am I so nervous, Richenda? We love each other, which is more than most brides have in their nuptial chamber."

"You will be fine." Richenda leaned forward to place a comforting hand on Mairona's arm. "All brides are nervous. I was anxious with Alaric, and I had all the experience of my first marriage behind me."

"I know everything will be alright. I should go to bed myself, because it would not do any good to fall asleep in the middle of my vows tomorrow."

"Would you like some assistance?" Richenda asked, moving away so Mairona could leave the window recess.

"No, Saraid will do fine. Thank you, Richenda. I shall see you in the morning."

"Pleasant dreaming, my lady." Richenda smiled and curtsied as one would to a queen, then turned to leave Mairona alone.

"Wait," she called to Richenda, blushing fiercely and looking down at the floor as she changed her mind. "I may need some assistance after all."

Controlling a knowing smile, Richenda resettled in the chair she had just vacated. "What can I do, my lady?"

Mairona opened and closed her mouth several times, trying to think of exactly what to say. Across from her, Richenda waited in patient silence, remembering her first wedding and the anxieties she had. Finally Mairona seemed ready to speak, and Richenda listened in seriousness.

"I want to please him tomorrow," she started slowly, her eyes trained on the floor. "I need to know how."

Richenda smiled comfortingly, though Mairona never looked up to see. "Mairona, you do not have to do anything special to please him. If the two of you truly want each other, things will work themselves out."

"But I do not want to just lie there." Mairona turned a deeper shade of red, pulling her knees up to her chin.

"Many brides do, simply from ignorance."

Mairona finally looked up at that. "I do not want to be many brides. Ignorance is a word I have never liked."

Rising, Richenda moved to sit in the window embrasure across from Mairona. Gently, she reminded Mairona that Kelson, like most men, probably did not expect anything more than her willingness. Then she gave Mairona a few ideas to try, talking on until her student tried to suppress a yawn.

"My lady, you should retire. Even if you survive the ceremony, you would not want to risk falling asleep tomorrow night before your husband has a chance to gain your bed." Richenda helped Mairona up, leading her to the bedchamber, but she brushed off the duchess.

"I shall be fine. You go to bed yourself. 'Tis late."

"As you wish, my queen. Sleep soundly." Richenda smiled, then left Mairona alone.

She opened one of the large windows and sat again, letting the winter air wash over her. If Saraid saw what she was doing she'd get a scolding regardless of the fact that she was about to become queen. The cold air refreshed her, though, and reminded her of home. Druimfada. It wouldn't be home, anymore. These new apartments here at Rhemuth were now her residence, and she was to be chatelaine of this castle and of all the crown lands, for Kelson rarely had the time to tend to those duties himself.

Closing the window finally, she rose and made her way into the bedroom. It would probably be her last night sleeping alone until Kelson left for Torenth. She stretched and yawned, allowing Saraid to undress her and put her to bed.

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A much more festive atmosphere reigned in the royal apartments. Wine had flowed freely that evening, lending to an unusually jovial atmosphere. It was very different than a previous evening spent before the last royal wedding, a somber, nervous night before Sidana's murder. Rather than being reflective, Kelson was now involved in a jesting match with Dhugal, entertaining Duncan, Nigel, and Morgan with their antics.

"To my brother!" Dhugal proclaimed, raising his cup so abruptly that wine sloshed over the rim. "May he forgive me for being envious that his bed will no longer be empty!"

Grinning, Kelson raised his cup in salute before draining a good half. "We'll just have to find you a wife, 'tis all," he chuckled. "Morgan, how many eligible cousins does Richenda have left?"

"A few." the blond duke raised an amused eyebrow. "Her R'Kassan kin are quite beautiful, I hear."

"I might even approve one or two," Duncan grinned, watching his son try not to squirm.

"'Tis bonnie tae know if they don' please ye, Kel, ye'll pass 'em on tae me," Dhugal said, a trifle sour as his border burr slipped into his normal court speech.

"I do believe you are starting to sound as bitter as I used to be!" Kelson laughed, refilling Dhugal's cup. "There is no reason to get all touchy, now. You do not have the entire royal council breathing down your neck to find a bride. Now Ewan and the rest will have to find something else to pester me about."

"Like the rigorous duty of getting an heir," Dhugal shot back.

Morgan grinned at Kelson. "I think our king will find it in himself to perform that function as dutifully as he does the rest."

"I hope Father Duncan will forgive me if I pursue that duty with a little more enthusiasm than most," Kelson snickered, downing the rest of his wine. "Is it possible to ask absolution now for a lifetime of marriage?"

"Kelson! I am shocked at you!" the bishop chided, but he couldn't keep a chuckle from his voice.

The king frowned at his goblet. "Must be the wine. What d'you think, Dhugal? You're more accustomed to this sort of drinking."

"I think you need more." The red-headed border duke lurched for the wineskin, pouring as much on the floor as he did in Kelson's outstretched cup. "Just make sure you don't have a hangover tomorrow morning or Mairona might have a word or two to say."

"More than two, I would wager," Kelson snorted.

"She might even shout them, to make your head hurt more."

"Aye," Kelson grinned. "She'd split my skull in half. Good thing I'll have a Healer nearby." He winked at Duncan, forgetting the full goblet in his hand. Nigel caught it before the king tilted it far enough to spill.

"I think you are disappearing in your cup, Kelson," Nigel quipped, letting go slowly enough to make sure his nephew could keep it straight.

Kelson frowned, staring at his drink. "Have I had too much?"

"Nah," Dhugal waved his free hand at the king. "You can still shpeak—speak." He got a startled look on his face when his tongue didn't move properly.

"But you cannot!" Kelson giggled. This time Nigel couldn't save the goblet before most of the contents were dumped on the floor. "Oops!" Kelson exclaimed, trying to right the cup, but he tipped it too far the other way and spilled some of the remainder on himself. Deciding not to waste the rest, he drained it to the dregs.

"Looks like you need more," Dhugal said loudly, reaching for the wineskin.

"I think our king would do better with water for the rest of the evening." Morgan snapped his fingers at the squire Ivo, who carried a pitcher over. Kelson was still snickering over Dhugal's speech as his cup was refilled with a milder liquid.

"Then, 'tis time for his nuptial advice," Dhugal noted. "Alaric, tell my dear brother what to do tomorrow night."

Duncan cleared his throat, then looked at Kelson. "I believe this is where I absent myself. After your night of drunken festivity, I will expect you for confession just after dawn." He turned his gaze to his son Dhugal. "Both of you."

Morgan chuckled. "You will not have to assign them penitence. God will do that well enough if we refuse to cure their hangovers in the morn."

"Aye, I may do just that." Duncan returned with a game grin.

"Father!" Dhugal cried, a stricken look on his face. The prospect of going through Kelson's wedding day with a hangover migraine made him want to die before sunrise.

"Don' worry, brother." Kelson elbowed his foster brother, not realizing his own speech was starting to slur. "If he won', I'll order Alaric as his king."

"Oh. Thash alrigh', then." Dhugal took another draught, spilling more down his front than into his mouth. His clumsiness set Kelson on another round of giggles.

"I think it is high time the both of you went to bed. But first you are both going to drink water until you drown." Morgan had Ivo fill another cup with water for Dhugal as he made sure Kelson drank his dutifully. The king balked on the refill, however.

"Whaddif I don' wan' to?" he mumbled.

"Then you do not drink it, and I leave you to Mairona's gentle ministrations on the morrow," Morgan retorted. Kelson frowned.

"I'd rather be thrashed."

"That could be arranged," Morgan chuckled, "but drinking the water is your least painless option."

Grimacing, Kelson downed the cup and then another. After Dhugal had drunk similarly, the three older men half-carried the groom and his foster brother to the state bed for the night. Morgan smiled at the memory of his own younger, tavern-frequenting days when he was commonly seen in such a state. Kelson had never had free enough rein to go through that stage of life, and probably would have passed up the option if it had been offered, so the duke smiled indulgently at his inebriated king. He and Duncan made sure both young men would wake feeling much better in the morning.

