

✠ Chapter 21 ✠

The awaited day arrived finally on a gray day in March, a late snow falling softly in the festival atmosphere. Surrounded by ladies, all daughters and wives of high nobility, Mairona entered the courtyard where the wedding procession was gathering. Richenda walked just behind her, carrying her long mantle so it wouldn't get wet and muddy in the new snow. At the foot of the steps Mairona paused and scanned the growing crowd, looking for one particular figure. The Queen Mother, however, was nowhere to be found. Raising her hand to the lion brooch pinning her mantle, Mairona took a deep breath.

"Are you nervous?" Richenda asked, shifting her hold on the yards of fabric trailing from the queen-to-be. Gwenhwyfar stepped forward to take a handful herself, saving a corner from being trampled in the mud

"Aye, of course I am!" Mairona smiled. "I am to become the Queen of Gwynedd! Oh, Richenda, how did this happen?"

"You dared challenge the king upon your arrival. Your courage intrigued him, and then your beauty set his blood racing!" The duchess gave a sly grin

"Richenda! Shame on you!" Mairona laughed. "What would your husband say?"

"He probably gave Kelson a lot more grief than you received," she replied, chuckling. "Between Alaric and Dhugal, I am certain our poor king took quite a beating last night before they all got drunk. Look, Fergal is waiting with your palfrey. Shall we go?"

Mairona grinned at her, then carefully crossed the distance to her old childhood friend. "Good morrow, Fergal," she beamed.

"You look absolutely radiant," he breathed in a stunned whisper as he bowed to kiss her hand.

"Hopefully Kelson will think so," she replied, her smile shining in the courtyard.

"If he is a man, he will." Fergal paused a moment, as if he were going to say something else, but he changed his mind and lifted her into the saddle. The horse was gentle, as white as the snow falling around them, and had beautiful lines. A very expensive mare, Fergal had noted, for the royal bride. Mairona deserved no less.

She settled herself comfortably on the palfrey's back as Richenda, Meraude, and Gwenhwyfar spread her mantle out behind her, trailing over the horse's tail. Jehana was still absent, and Mairona wondered if she would dare not attend her son's wedding. Fergal mounted his own horse beside Mairona, taking her reins, and a group of knights arranged the green canopy that would protect her from the snow en route to the cathedral.

It was at that moment that Kelson entered, Morgan and Dhugal on either side. Everything seemed to freeze when he saw Mairona atop that white mare, adjusting the folds of her dress with gloved hands. She was a lovely vision in green, the same shade that matched her eyes, with a necklace gracing her throat in a pattern of alternating emeralds and rubies. Golden curls cascaded down her back, stirring in the breeze and threatening to dislodge the winter flowers that her ladies had carefully woven and braided to frame her face. Warm, crystalline eyes rose to meet his when she sensed his presence, favoring him with a glowing smile. This was his glorious Deryni queen, the bride God had intended for him. She was worth the wait and all the previous marital trials he had endured.

Descending the stairs, Kelson threaded his way in a dreamlike state through the busy courtyard to his bride. "My lady," he breathed, kissing her hand. "I would have wished sun for our wedding, but now there is nothing to outshine your beauty."

Mairona squeezed his hand when he would let go. "The Lord God has granted that snow may give us a white carpet to tread as we make our way to our nuptials."

Kelson gave her a dazzling smile that made her heart skip a beat. "Shall I start the procession to the cathedral, my lady?"

"Aye," she smiled. "Let us journey to our wedding."

As Kelson made his way to where his squire was holding his stallion, he thought his chest would burst for joy. She was so beautiful, and she loved him, and he loved her, and in a little while she would be his for the rest of their mortal lives. She would be the flower in his crown, and fill the aching loneliness that he had carried with him from the moment he ascended to the throne. Mairona was living proof of a loving and merciful God watching over his servant.

Mairona's eyes followed him as he crossed the yard. There was a spring to his step that she had only seen at her welcoming feast, a sign of momentary carefree abandon that a king can taste only rarely. She smiled, rejoicing that his happiness reflected her own. After a brief word to his squire, Kelson mounted his horse in a quick, fluid motion. Turning to see Morgan and Dhugal at his side, he gave the command to begin the short journey to the cathedral.

That brief order brought the end of her life as she had known it. No longer could she be her own master, doing as she pleased with no one to gainsay her. She was now bound by the very crown that rested on Kelson's brow, bound to its bearer. Druimfada was no longer hers, as a usurper had been sitting in its walls for several weeks. She had already lost a great deal of freedom with the personal guard Kelson had given her. But only now, as the procession began, was it all truly over.

That brought a momentary sadness as she realized the life she had held so dear was slipping away, changed forever by burdens this day would place on her. But then she saw Kelson turn around from across the courtyard, twisting back in his saddle to grin at her. Her heart swelled thinking of their joining, and the richness of life with such a Deryni as he. There was much she could help him do for Gwynedd and all its people, human and Deryni alike. Perhaps it was only a new beginning.

Mairona's mind was in a whirl, and to her later regret she couldn't remember most of the morning except for moments of wonder and joy. The snow had thinned to flurries when she had entered the cathedral square, and the sky was lighter. It was still too cold for the traditional exchange of vows outside the church doors, so there was a great procession of royalty and bishops down the cathedral nave. Fergal had said something before he escorted her through the church, and she thought she had replied, but her attention was on the beauty of the midwinter greenery bound to the columns and on the sheer number of people present. Jehana was there, standing with Meraude and Nigel, completely unreadable. And Kelson—

He stood near the altar, glorious in Haldane red with embroidered cloth-of-gold lions studded with uncountable jewels. The great ruby in his ear called the Eye of Rom flashed fire in the barest hint of his aura, which she answered with her own. The journey down the aisle was blurred, and for the life of her she couldn't remember how she got from the vestibule to the apse. She did remember Kelson's very unkingly grin as Fergal put her hand in his, and they kneeled in front of the archbishop. An onslaught of heavy incense tickled her nose, which brought on a sneezing fit that the archbishops gracefully ignored. Kelson nearly chuckled at that, but suppressed the urge when Archbishop Bradene looked at him sternly as his colleague recited Scripture.

"Listen my daughter and understand; pay me careful heed. Forget your people and your

father's house, that the king might desire your beauty. He is your lord; honor him, daughter of Tyre. Then the richest of the people will seek your favor with gifts—"

I will love and honor you always, Kelson, she sent with mind-speech.

And I, you, came the feather-touch of his reply.

"—every man should have his own wife, and every woman her own husband. The husband should fulfill his duty toward his wife, and likewise the wife toward her husband. A wife does not have authority over her own body, but rather her husband, and similarly a husband does not have authority over his own body, but rather his wife."

Mairona could barely hear the words, as the wonder of what was happening threatened to overwhelm her. The greatest miracle God could have given her was kneeling at her side, and the two of them were being joined in a way no one could part. His love and joy radiated, merging with her own and forming their own little personal heaven. Then came the presence.

It wasn't as monumental as the archangels summoned to watch the quarters during a ritual working, but it was big. Daring to look up, Mairona took in a deep breath when she saw the ghostly figure behind the bishops arrayed before her. Her grip on Kelson's hand tightened as she tried to steady herself, her face transfixed with awe and a little fear at the gray-robed figure, whose silvery-blond head bowed slightly to smile down at the pair.

Do not be afraid, Kelson told her.

Is that St. Camber? she asked timidly.

Aye. Hail, Holy One. Kelson dipped his head in acknowledgment of the saint's presence.

Hail to you, Kelson of Gwynedd, and to your queen. The figure's voice was fatherly, which set Mairona more at ease, though she retained her viselike grip on Kelson.

Hail, Great One, she returned shyly.

The incorporeal presence smiled warmly as it retreated a little when the time came to exchange vows. Archbishop Bradene cleared his throat.

"Kelson, King of Gwynedd and Prince of Meara, wilt thou accept Mairona to thy wife, according to the law of the Holy Church?"

Shining gray eyes fixed on Mairona as he replied. "*Volo.*" *I will,* spoken physically and psychically. The archbishop turned to Mairona.

"Mairona, Baroness of Druimfada, wilt thou accept Kelson to thy husband, according to the law of the Holy Church?"

"*Volo,*" she smiled. *I will accept you.* Kelson's fingers squeezed hers gently.

His crimson aura shone more brightly as he pledged himself to her, allowing Bradene to prompt him through the ancient formula.

I, Kelson, wittingly and of deliberate mind, having twenty years completed in the month of November last, contract matrimony with the lady Mairona Brigid ní Dhugain, Baroness of Druimfada; and take the said Mairona unto and for my wife and spouse, and all other for her forsake, during her and mine lives natural; and thereto I plight and give to her my faith and troth.

As he spoke the words, he opened himself fully to her, and they both shared their joy and awe of each other. This was what he had been made to wait for, and here was a gift so wonderful and perfect that it could only have come from God.

Then she was reciting the same words, locked onto Kelson's eyes.

I, Mairona, wittingly and of deliberate mind, having eighteen years completed on this day, contract matrimony with the right High and Mighty Prince Kelson Cinhil Rhys Anthony Haldane, King of Gwynedd, Prince of Meara, and Lord of the Purple March, and take the said Kelson unto and for my husband and spouse, and all other for him forsake, during his and mine lives natural; and thereto I plight and give to him my faith and troth.

Kelson beamed at her.

When she finished, the bishops blessed the ring. Duncan's eyes widened as his Deryni sight saw the less solid hand of St. Camber, also held over the ring to say his prayers. It was handed to Kelson, who gently slipped it on thumb, index, and middle fingers before placing it on her ring finger as he recited,

"In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, I thee wed."

Engraved in the gold was the figure of a lion, gently holding a ruby heart in its jaws. Mairona could only glance briefly at it before Duncan's stole was used to bind their hands together in the conclusion of the wedding ceremony. Cardiel, Bradene, and Duncan all lay their hands over the stole to pronounce the final blessing. This time there was no surprise as a final, less solid hand came to rest on top. Two voices recited the words, Bradene heard by all, the other heard only to Deryni.

"Ego conjungo vos in matrimonium, in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen."

As the choir began a triumphal chant, Kelson held his breath fearfully. This was where Sidana had been murdered by her brother, what seemed like so many years ago. *Please, Lord, let Mairona live*, he entreated, lifting his eyes briefly to heaven. St. Camber smiled down compassionately just as the sun came out from behind the clouds, bathing the newly-married couple in dazzling, colored light. Mairona looked up in wonder at the sun-filled window in the apse, then back down to smile at Kelson.

It was time for the kiss of peace. Archbishop Cardiel lifted a heavy, jewel-encrusted bible from the altar and kissed it, then transferred the kiss to the king. He in turn tilted his head down to give a chaste kiss of peace to Mairona.

Greetings, my lady wife, he sent to her.

And to you, my lord husband, she returned joyfully.

The coronation was the haziest part for her. Duncan's stole was removed from their hands, and the bishops blessed her consort crown. They waited while Kelson removed the ring of braided flowers from her head. Her forehead was anointed with oil, and then Kelson took the crown and placed it on her brow, delightedly proclaiming her Queen Consort of Gwynedd.

The new couple turned to face their subjects in the nave as the choir's chanting swelled to fill the cathedral with song. Kelson raised his arm, and his queen rested hers gently on top so he could grasp her fingers. Their recession down the nave was taken at a dignified pace completely at odds with their childlike expressions of happiness and devotion that proved to be contagious as they passed. Brilliant sunlight shining from the new snow blinded them as they moved outside, and it took a few minutes before they could see well enough to navigate the steps down to the

cobblestone square where their palfreys were waiting.

Kelson held her hand tightly when she turned to glance at her white mare. "Ride with me," he requested.

"As my husband wishes," she responded lightly.

"Dhugal!" Kelson called, looking around for his brother.

"Aye, my prince?" the border earl returned, carefully formal in front of the growing confusion milling in the square.

"Would you assist your queen?" asked Kelson, motioning Dolfin to take the reins of his mount.

"Gladly," Dhugal grinned, "for a price."

"And what would that be, my lord?" Mairona smiled as Kelson swung up into the saddle.

"Why, your Highness, a kiss from the bride."

Mairona was initially confused, wondering why Dhugal was addressing Kelson with the answer to her question. An embarrassed giggle erupted when she realized that she was now also "your Highness."

"If my lord husband does not object," she replied, glancing up at Kelson.

"The only one *I* have gotten from my bride needed the approval of the Archbishop in a church," he returned, playfully indignant. "I have not had a decent wife's kiss."

"I shall have plenty of those for you," Mairona looked up at him mischievously through her lashes before turning to give Dhugal a sisterly kiss on the cheek.

"Well, now," Dhugal grinned, lifting her up to Kelson's arms. Riding on the bones of a horse's shoulder was certainly not the most comfortable or secure perch, but she settled as best as she could in front of him, leaning in the crook of his arm for support. Kelson grabbed her crown when it threatened to topple off, resettling it firmly on her head.

"Do I get mine now?" Kelson whispered in her ear.

"Tis yours for the taking," she replied.

The growing crowd cheered when their lips met in a kiss considerably more passionate than the one they exchanged in the cathedral. Even the archbishops couldn't refrain from a smile as Ewan sighed in contentment.

"Och, now an old man can die in peace," he grinned from ear to ear.

"I have a feeling I shall have the pleasure of your company until there is at least an heir or two!" Kelson replied, urging his mount forward to begin the journey back to the keep.

"I hope the lad's right," Ewan replied more softly, so only the men still at the top of the steps could hear.

"So do we all, Ewan." Archbishop Cardiel laid a hand on the old duke's shoulder. "Is there something you have not told us?"

"Nah. Watching the lad and lass wed makes me feel old," the duke laughed.

"That is well, because the royal council just will not be the same until you find something else to badger our king with," Cardiel grinned back, releasing the duke. "Now let us depart ourselves. I am famished."

Alone in the midst of the crowd, Fergal watched Mairona and the king leave together, oblivious to everything but their own little world of bliss. His heart felt as if it would explode, and he knew that he couldn't stay in Rhemuth much longer. As soon as possible he would have to find a way to return in Meara, and make his fortune there.