

## ✘ Chapter 24 ✘

Fergal shifted nervously, waiting for the squire to announce him. The king's guards watched him intently, increasing his discomfort. What was taking so blasted long? Finally Ivo returned to the door and opened it wide for him. "The king will see you now," the boy said, taking the lead through the solar and into Kelson's study. "The Lord Fergal ó Hearne," the boy said before retreating to an unnoticeable corner. Fergal knelt before the king.

"Rise, Fergal," Kelson bade him. "This is not the hall, or the court. A mere bow would suffice."

Fergal just nodded his head in acknowledgment, getting to his feet with hands clasped in front. "Sire," he greeted.

"What is it?" the king asked, studying the Mearan closely. Something was making him nervous, although Fergal was always uneasy in Kelson's presence.

"I—my lord, you need—I think I may be able to help your Highness in Meara," he finally stammered out, his fingers working in an agitated pattern. Kelson raised an eyebrow.

"And how do you intend to help me?" His gray eyes held Fergal in a steady gaze as he made a steeple with his hands.

Words started tumbling out of Fergal's mouth quickly. "Sire, you need someone you can trust in Druimfada. That someone must also be Mearan so Rolf's men will trust him. I can be that man."

Exhaling audibly, Kelson leaned back in his chair. "You have abandoned them, Fergal, and flown to the enemy. Why would they trust you?"

"I have long had Her Highness the queen's ear. My purpose in Rhemuth was to try to talk her into her duty," Fergal replied, sweat starting to bead on his forehead. "I was loyal enough to the cause before that they would believe it."

"It might work," Kelson acknowledged. "You do, of course, realize the danger involved?"

"Aye, Sire," Fergal replied, looking at the floor briefly.

"So, then, we come to the real question." The king watched Fergal's head rise, a curious look of suspicion in his eye. "You yourself said you were loyal to the Mearan cause before. How do I know I can trust you?"

To Kelson's surprise, Fergal didn't seem to have anticipated that question. He took a few moments to collect his thoughts before answering. "I would never do anything to harm Mairona," the Mearan chieftain finally replied.

"Mairona, yes, but what about me?" Kelson stood, then moved around the table to stand right in front of Fergal. "Your loyalty has been through Mairona from the beginning. I am your king, anointed by God, and sovereign Prince of Meara since that land passed through marriage to my great-grandfather. What if Mairona were not my wife?"

Fergal paused, then looked down at a spot on the floor a couple feet behind the king. "We both know that answering that question will get me nowhere," he whispered, then his voice gained strength. "Lady Mairona— Her Highness wishes Druimfada returned to her. I mean to work to that end."

"I see." Kelson returned to his chair, keeping a close watch on the Mearan. Though Fergal saw only a cool, confident exterior, the king was plagued with indecisiveness. "And would restoring Druimfada to its rightful lady also involve a movement for Mearan independence?"

"How can it?" Fergal replied. "The Mearan queen has married Gwynedd's king."

"Yes, she has." Kelson fell silent, just trying to read Fergal. Everything he had said so far was the truth, but could he be hiding something? Had he answered a question carefully enough to side-step Truth Reading? Casting out with his senses, he read the all-too-human Fergal's emotions. There didn't seem to be any deception, but there was confusion that his lady had refused the crown of Meara, and a suspiciously overwhelming desire to get as far away as possible from Rhemuth and the king. "Why have you suddenly decided to leave?"

"I— Sire, please do not ask me that."

"Come now, Fergal," replied Kelson, leaning forward over the table. The great Eye of Rom in his ear winked ominously in the firelight. "You could not possibly expect me to send you to Druimfada without reading you very thoroughly and placing a few Deryni protective measures, since Rolf is of our race and would be certain to expect treachery. You can either tell me now, or let me find out then."

Caught, Fergal's hands balled into fists. Slowly, consciously, he relaxed and let them hang at his side. "My presence here cannot come to any good," he said finally, making his confession. "I have loved Mairona since we were children."

A grim smile flashed across Kelson's face as he sensed truth. "Do you think I did not see that? I knew from the very first day you came to Rhemuth. It amazes me that Mairona never saw, after all those years."

"She did not want to see," Fergal admitted sadly. "I was a safe friend as a brother-figure. Now she is very happy as your queen, and I can be nothing more."

"It seems we share an uneasy bond, then." Kelson sighed, suddenly sympathizing with the unfortunate man in front of him. An old saying came to mind; *fortune is what you make for yourself*. Fergal had stayed in the background too long, losing his lady to another man who was not so hesitant. "Make your plans, for you leave on the morrow. After the evening meal tonight, come to me and I will prepare you."

Fergal swallowed, not looking forward to what Kelson had to do. The king would read him very closely, to make sure he could indeed be trusted. But he had to leave, and this was the only way to do so honorably. Bowing profusely in gratitude, he backed out of the room.

Once he had left, Kelson rested his face in his hands. "I sincerely hope this is not a mistake," he whispered to himself, rubbing between his eyebrows. Ivo poured a goblet of wine and placed it on the table in front of his master. "Thank you," Kelson smiled, taking a deep draught. "Ivo, go join the other boys in sport outside. I am certain you do not want to be cooped up with your king while he thinks so hard his head bursts."

"Who would clean up the mess if it does?" Ivo asked with a grin. Kelson chuckled. This boy was turning out extraordinarily well.

"Go on, get out of here. I shall manage somehow."

"Thank you, Sire," the boy said, bowing excitedly before racing out the door. The king smiled after him, musing on a joyful youth he wished he could have had. Some men had to be born to

higher callings than others, and that meant sacrifices. Too many sacrifices. Moody again, he leaned back in his chair and stared at the fire's flames, trying very hard not to think about anything.

He was still in that same position when the solar door opened, taking his attention. "Kelson?" his wife's voice called.

"Mairí," he grinned, holding out his arms. "Are you a gracious sight this afternoon."

With a warm smile, she deftly avoided his embrace and walked behind him to knead aching shoulders. "I think you need this more," she told him.

"Ah, yes," he purred, letting his shields slip and inviting her in. "You always seem to know what to do."

"Ivo gave me a little help before he left, I must confess. How does that feel?"

"Perfect." For the moment, Kelson let himself slip into a smaller world of her touch, both physical and mental. It was certainly more pleasurable than the larger reality he needed to face later.

Mairona let him relax for a few minutes, working the stress out of his shoulders and neck. When he finally leaned back against the chair and her, she stopped, lightly resting her hands on his shoulders.

"Do you want to talk about anything in particular?" she asked.

Snorting, Kelson pulled her around in front of him. She sat on the table he had been working on. "Fergal wants to return to Druimfada to spy on Rolf for you."

"He what?" Surprise and anger flashed across her face, with a hint of worry. "The fool! Rolf is Deryni! He will get himself killed!"

"I know," Kelson sighed, "and I wish I knew who is the bigger fool—him for asking to go or me for allowing him."

"You did not!" She tried to stare him down, emerald eyes smoldering, but he held his ground firmly. Letting out an explosive breath, she pushed herself off the table and paced to the fireplace. "I do not believe—!" She paced back to the table opposite her husband and planted her hands on the wood. "Why do you want to send him to his death?"

Kelson leaned forward, putting his face within a foot of his wife's. "Me? Mairona, he is the one who wants to leave Rhemuth, and where else could he possibly go? His lands are part of Druimfada!"

Her voice grew in intensity until she was almost yelling. "What did you do to make him want to leave? He is terrified of you!"

Shaking his head, Kelson leaned back. He refused to get baited into a shouting match. "How can you be so well-trained a Deryni and be so blind?" he asked calmly. Mairona pulled away, startled. "Fergal has been in love with you for years, and you have gone and wed another man. So now he is here in Rhemuth with nothing to do but frequent the local taverns and miserably watch you happily married to me. He openly admitted his loyalty is to you, not me. How long before he starts making trouble? What do you suggest I do with him?"

"You are jealous," she accused, no longer so certain of herself.

"No, I am not."

Muttering in disgust, Mairona pushed herself off the table and started for the door to the solar. She jerked it open, but Kelson called before she could leave.

"Mairí?"

"Aye, my lord," she growled between her teeth. Turning halfway, she gave him a look that could have pierced through the thick tower walls. It didn't faze him.

"I discovered something very interesting when I read Fergal. He seems to think you were in alliance with Tirkeeve, that you welcomed him to Druimfada."

"Aye, I welcomed him," she spat. "I welcomed a fellow Mearan chief who had visited Druimfada before. He wished to discuss a vision of a future Meara. I also had a vision, and it differed from his somewhat. We disagreed violently, as you know."

Sighing, Kelson banished the doubt that had unworthily niggled at the back of his mind. "Fergal is your man, so talk to him. If you want him to stay, give the order and he has no choice. I yield to your wishes in this matter."

Leaning her head against the edge of the door, she almost smiled. Fergal could be stupidly stubborn if he really had made up his mind to return to Meara. Kelson had just given Mairona her way while condemning her to a long, unpleasant afternoon of arguing with Fergal. "I do not know whether to thank you or hate you," she chuckled, softening and flashing a brief grin. Kelson returned the smile.

"Thank me this time. There will be plenty of opportunity for hate in the years to come."

"Then I thank you, my king," she smiled sweetly, sweeping in an overly-dramatic curtsy.

"You won, you do not have to flaunt it," Kelson laughed. "Get out of here and let me get back to work."

Blowing him a kiss, she disappeared into the solar with her brilliant blue skirts flashing just before the door closed. Shaking his head, Kelson stared at the door a few moments before turning back to the urgent matters at hand.