

✠ Chapter 25 ✠

Mairona strode through the gardens, barely noticing their budding spring beauty as she purposefully aimed for the King's Tower and her meeting with Kelson and Nigel. There was too much to discuss yet about what Kelson wanted Nigel to accomplish in his absence, and Mairona didn't want to miss a word. Knowledge would be power this summer, at least as far as getting her out of the ladies' solar to what she saw as her rightful place as queen consort.

Her thoughts were disturbed by a boy moving to intercept her. "My lady," he hailed, jogging to reach her before she left the gardens.

"Liam," she smiled, pulling her veil back over her shoulder so she could get a better look at the boy king. "Did you receive the Torenth colors I had made for you?"

"Aye, my lady, thank you," he beamed, eyes shining. "I have something for you as well. Kelson told me that you know how to scry?"

"Aye," Mairona replied, intrigued. "That is how we learned of Mahael's influence in Meara."

"I have something that may help Kelson this summer." He offered a small package, which Mairona took carefully. "Tis a ring that my uncle gave me, hoping to use it to spy on matters at Rhemuth. I have only touched it to neutralize his spell, so his trace is still detectable."

Mairona's eyes widened, looking from this heaven-sent gift to the boy who offered it. "Do you understand what I can do with this?" she asked carefully.

"Aye," Liam swallowed. "You can find where my uncle is moving his army, and maybe even determine his plans. That will help Kelson win, and help me live long enough to gain my throne."

Laughing, Mairona hugged the boy and kissed him firmly. He flushed in adolescent pleasure. "Liam, when you do gain your throne, Gwynedd and Torenth will be such great friends that together you could rule the world! Thank you!"

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Later that night in the same gardens, a certain young border duke found Ailín waiting for him, apparently unattended. "Dhugal!" she exclaimed, running and throwing her arms around his neck.

"Good evening," he grinned before kissing her soundly on the lips. She pulled back with a dreamy smile. "Where is your serving maid?" he asked, searching the gardens.

"Asleep," she giggled, pulling him into a small enclosure walled with hedges. Its relative privacy had long ago led to it being called the Trysting Corner. "I slipped something into her wine tonight. She will not wake until morning."

Dhugal made a clucking noise with his tongue, shaking his head. "What would your father think?"

"Nothing, unless someone tells him." She looked up at him mischievously as she sat on a bench. He settled next to her, suddenly nervous. "What is it?" she asked, concern in her eyes. He smiled uneasily, fumbling to pull something out of a pouch on his belt.

"I, um, want to give you something before I leave on campaign. I do not know how much of my time Kelson will demand the next two days before we leave, so I give it to you now."

Tentatively, he held out a small cloth-wrapped bundle. She took it and undid the folds, uncovering a solid gold cloak clasp in the form of a sleeping lion, the McLain badge.

"Tis beautiful," she breathed.

"Tis like to one my father gave my mother on their wedding night. I would like you to keep it safe for me," he told her, brushing her cheek.

"I will do that," she whispered. "Theirs was a secret marriage, was it not?"

"Aye," Dhugal confirmed. "They were parted soon after, and she died birthing me. My father did not even know of me until a few years ago."

"It seems like a bard's tale," she sighed. He embraced her, kissing her forehead and then her lips. She pulled away before he could venture any further. "I have something for you, too."

Reaching down into her gown, she pulled out a chain and pulled it over her head. "Tis not much, and it cannot compare with your clasp, but it is all I have to give. It belonged to my grandmother, who was very dear to me, and I have worn it ever since her death."

"Then it is more precious than the clasp," Dhugal replied, taking the chain. There was a small stone at the bottom, with a hole drilled in the middle to thread the chain through. He sucked in a breath as he recognized the amber crystal. "Shiral," he breathed, staring at the stone and then up at Ailín.

"What is it?" she asked him. "What does that mean?"

"Tis the name of the stone," he said quickly. "This belonged to your grandmother?"

"Aye," she nodded tentatively. Dhugal got very excited.

"Shiral is used as a focus by Deryni who are learning to exercise their power." He held the stone cupped in the palm of his hand, took a deep breath, and watched an amber glow grow within its depths. Ailín watched in fearful awe, torn by curiosity and the old teachings that Deryni were all cursed by the devil. Blinking, Dhugal looked at her as the light died. "Will you indulge me?" he asked.

"Aye," she replied nervously.

"Hold out your hand," he commanded. She complied, and he dropped the stone and chain into it. "Now close your eyes, and take deep breaths. Relax, and let your breathing get slower and deeper—" Talking her into a trance, he watched her face grow calm and glanced down at the stone. Nothing. "Very good," he said, hiding his initial disappointment. "Relax, imagine yourself sinking." He ventured to her, urging her onward. The stone flickered faintly, then gradually settled into a steady glow. Dhugal smiled triumphantly. "Open your eyes," he said gently.

She did, and saw the stone shining in her hand. Startled, she dropped it and broke the trance. The light flickered and died. Ailín stared at the stone, then at Dhugal, then back at the stone.

"What does that mean?" she squeaked.

"You are most definitely Deryni." He studied her closely for her reaction. Her mouth worked up and down, and her eyes darted between him and the stone several times. Finally she picked it up and deposited it in his hand.

"Does that please you?" she asked, afraid to think about the implications of what just occurred.

"Ailín, you have no idea of what that means we could share."

He took her hand and brushed gently against her mind. It was the lightest feather-touch, and set her body tingling. A slow smile worked across her face as she decided that if this pleased him, she would let it please her. That smile turned anxious as a new thought came unbidden.

"Dhugal, what if you do not return?" she asked, looking up with apprehensive eyes. He just kissed her, and her arms fell around his waist as he pulled her close. She didn't stop him when his hand slipped underneath her gown, for if he did what she secretly thrilled for, her father couldn't force her to marry John of Drostan.

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The royal apartments were a flurry of activity as Kelson was organizing affairs with his uncle Nigel for his absence and Mairona tried her best to listen in while overseeing the packing of his things for the long summer ahead. There were too many things that needed to be accomplished in the two days before the army's departure, and only sweet Brigid knew how it would all be achieved. The packing was forgotten when Kelson started detailing the role he wanted Mairona to play in assisting Nigel. She held one of her husband's undertunics forgotten in her lap as she paid close attention. Kelson explained that she was not to be excluded from anything, although for now her role was more of an observer than an active participant in matters of state.

"She and Richenda will be your contacts with me should the need arise for mind speech," he continued. "Fergal has also established himself in Druimfada. He should hopefully be able to provide some valuable information."

"I understand," Nigel nodded, rubbing his brow. It had been a long day, and promised to be a longer night.

"Just a brief word of advice, Uncle," Kelson grinned tiredly. "Mairí's most agreeable when she gets her way."

"Kelson!" she exclaimed, balling up the tunic to launch it at him. He caught it easily just before it hit his face.

"Most women are," Nigel chuckled. "I shall be sure to keep it in mind, though."

Mairona looked at both of them, feigning disgust. "Men," she muttered, shaking her head. Kelson laughed, handing the undertunic off to Ivo to be packed with his other things. When the squire was gone, the king turned serious as he took Mairona's hand.

"Uncle, I have a favor to ask you."

"Anything," Prince Nigel replied. His nephew gave him a small smile.

"If something should happen to me this summer—"

"Nothing is going to happen to you," Mairona interrupted vehemently. Kelson squeezed her hand.

"If anything should happen, Mairona has no family left."

"I will care for her, Kelson," Nigel said.

"No you will not, because nothing is going to happen," Mairona insisted, holding her husband's hand very tightly. They were interrupted when Dolfin entered the room.

"Sire, his Grace the Duke of Cassan wishes to see you," the squire bowed.

"Show him in," Kelson told him, leaning back in his chair. Dhugal entered the room, looking very uncomfortable as he approached.

"Kelson, I need to talk to you," the young border duke fidgeted. Kelson appraised him in one look, then turned to Mairona and Nigel.

"I am certain the two of you have many things you need to discuss between yourselves," he told them.

"Yes, we do," Nigel agreed, rising. Kelson kissed Mairona on the cheek before she and Nigel departed for the solar. As soon as the door was closed, Dhugal sank into a vacated chair and played with the stem of Nigel's discarded goblet.

"What is wrong?" Kelson asked.

"Nothing serious, exactly," Dhugal started, a slight smile on his face. "I am sorry to bother you, and I know there are a thousand things you need to do before we leave, but I, ah, need to get married tonight and would like you to be a witness."

"Tonight? *Khadasa!*" Kelson leaned forward, studying his brother closely. "Why so hurried? Dhugal, if you want to get married, wait until we return from campaign and I shall give you a state wedding to match my own!"

Dhugal looked down at his thumbs, obviously embarrassed. "It has to be before we leave, Kel. Ailín and I met in the gardens, and she started talking about the campaign. One thing led to another, and, ah, things went a little too far."

"Could she be with child?" Kelson asked.

"I do not know, but when she realized the possibility the poor lass nearly fell apart." Dhugal replied with a timid smile. "Whether or not she is, if anything happens to me this summer she will be compromised. So I must marry her, and tomorrow there will not be time."

Kelson chuckled, shaking his head. "Dhugal, I am happy for you, and nothing could stop me from being there. I always thought you would marry Deryni, though."

Dhugal's face flushed with pride as he looked up. "She is Deryni. Her grandmother gave her a shiral crystal when she died, and Ailín made it light. I am hoping Mairona and Richenda can start training her while we are away."

"Should it worry me that there will be another Deryni duchess helping my wife engage in ladies' intrigues?" Kelson grinned.

"I had not thought to make another one so soon," the border duke returned.

"You did manage to make a mess of things, Brother," Kelson chided. Dhugal flashed an awkward smile. "I assume your father will be presiding?"

"Aye, if he agrees," Dhugal nodded. "I, ah, was hoping you would help me tell him."

"He does not know?" Kelson exhaled loudly. "Sorry, Brother, but you are on your own. After he lectures you and decides to comply, I shall come witness your vows."

"My father's a priest, Kel. A bishop, for God's sake. Ye're throwin' me tae the wolves!" Dhugal grinned, letting his border burr spill through.

"I think Duncan will be more understanding than you give him credit for," Kelson told him. "Did he not do much the same thing himself with your mother?"

"Aye, but he at least got the wedding and bedding in the right order."

Kelson snickered, imitating Dhugal's native speech. "We cannae all be saints. Does her father know?"

"Ailín was going to tell him and try to make him favorable before I have to ask him for her hand."

"Tis well you are his liege lord, Dhugal, or matters would be more complicated."

Dhugal grinned self-consciously. "I know," he muttered.

"Now go tell your father so we can see you married." Kelson shooed him away with his hand.

"If I live long enough," Dhugal snorted. "I shall return for you when he lets me off my penitential knees."

"Get out of here," Kelson laughed. "Sunset already approaches, and I am weary. If you take too long saying your *Ave Marias*, I may fall asleep."

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Reluctant to face his father just yet, Dhugal instead found himself approaching Lord Geoffrey's small rented townhouse in the city. As one of the servants led him to Geoffrey's quarters over the hall, he could hear raised voices from the room. Ailín's was particularly prominent, but of the other two he couldn't tell which was her father and which was her brother, Conor, now just at the verge of manhood. This didn't look to be any easier than facing Duncan. *I am Geoffrey's duke*, he reminded himself as he summoned the courage to knock on the door. The voices fell silent.

Lord Geoffrey opened the door himself, an exasperated expression on his face. "Come in, your Grace," he invited with a bow. "We were just discussing you."

"You are gracious, sir," Dhugal returned, stepping into the room. Ailín and her blond-haired brother had been faced off on the other side of the close quarters, but both had turned to see whom the intruder was.

"Dhugal!" Ailín called in relief. Conor's face contorted in fury.

"So, this is the Deryni bastard who defiled my sister!" he spat. In one seamless motion, he drew his dagger and threw himself at the border duke. Ailín and Geoffrey both gasped in dread as Dhugal whirled out of harm's way, reaching out to grab Conor's arm. The boy stopped suddenly, eyes going glassy as Dhugal grasped hold with his mind and took control of the defenseless, human boy.

"I suggest you drop that blade," Dhugal commanded. Conor's fist opened, and the dagger fell to the floor. "Do you know what the king would do to someone who tried to murder the one he calls Brother?" Conor's eyes grew wide in terror as he began to understand the consequences of his rash actions, while Geoffrey was torn between defending his only heir and separating himself from an act of treason.

"Now," Dhugal continued forcefully. "You are still young and I believe you acted without thought. For the sake of your sister, I shall forgive you calling me a bastard. I even forgive you for trying to kill me." He bent to pick up the dagger and stuffed it in his belt. "If you promise to behave yourself." The controls were released, and Conor backed away warily.

"What were you thinking?" Geoffrey hissed at his son. "He is your duke!"

"Aye, I am your duke," Dhugal said, "but tonight I come simply as a man who would ask your daughter's hand in marriage." Geoffrey just stared at him, unwilling to answer. Ailín saw her father's indecision, and took a step toward Dhugal. He noticed a light bruise purpling on her cheek as he held out his hand to her. She moved to his side and slightly behind, like she was trying to shield herself.

"Please, Father?" she begged.

Geoffrey shook his head. "I have just arranged your marriage to John of Drostan! Now I am supposed to tell him my daughter refuses? He would be insulted, would take my land in recompense! Our name would be dishonored!"

Dhugal turned on Ailín. "You never told me that!"

She just shrugged, refusing to meet his eyes. "Please, Father?" she repeated. "John of Drostan is an old drunken lout."

"A rich, old drunken lout," her brother corrected from the back of the room.

"Conor, be silent!" Geoffrey hissed.

"Father, I could be a duchess. My children will be dukes," Ailín pleaded, clutching Dhugal's hand for support. He thought that her fingers shook, and Deryni senses confirmed not the hope he had expected, but fear. Of what? The bestowal of another tender bruise? Squeezing her fingers, Dhugal fixed his hard attention on Geoffrey.

"As my vassal, you require my approval for such a match before the contracts are ratified. Did you overlook that, or are arrangements not yet final?" Dhugal asked, cold blue eyes displaying just what he thought of being overlooked. Geoffrey's hands waved nervously.

"Of course your approval was not forgotten, my lord. I thought to seek it after returning home."

"When I was on military campaign with the king? Your answer does not ring true, Geoffrey." Turning to Ailín, Dhugal noticed that she trembled when he bent to kiss her hand. He had intended to release her, but one look at her face changed his mind, and instead he sheltered her in his arm as he turned back to her father. "How much did Drostan offer in bride price?"

Geoffrey swallowed awkwardly, no longer able to look his duke in the face. "My land is poor, and my income has been failing. He promised to double my estates and bear the expenses of Conor's eventual knighting."

"I see."

Ailín turned to Dhugal and buried her head in his shoulder. He glanced at her before continuing, rage at Geoffrey's callousness mingling with growing dread over what would have happened to his helpless sparrow of a girl had he not interfered.

"There is strong suspicion that Drostan beat his former wife to death. His offer seems small exchange for your daughter's life, or is a secure income of more import to you? Since this

arrangement has now been brought to my attention, I do not give my approval. In fact, I forbid Drostan from ever marrying again as protection to the maidens and widows in my domain. Since the contract could not be finalized, Drostan has no ground to take your lands and there is no dishonor to your family. Ailín is free for me to claim her as my own wife and duchess."

"And your bride price?" Geoffrey prompted. Dhugal could not believe his sheer gall.

"I allow you to keep your land after the insult you have tendered your liege lord."

Geoffrey threw his hands up with an explosive sigh. "What choice do I have?"

"None," Dhugal confirmed evenly. "I expect you to deliver my bride to the royal chapel in one hour's time. The necessary contracts will be ready for your signature then, and there will be no room for negotiating their contents. I know this is not necessary, for you must be a loving father, but it would incur my wrath if she were in a worse physical or emotional condition than she is now. Is that clearly understood?"

"Aye, your Grace," Geoffrey muttered.

Dhugal felt a feather-light touch on the edge of his shields as Ailín attempted to exercise her newly-discovered powers as he had started teaching her in the gardens. She didn't even believe that he would hear, but was content to let the thought echo in her own mind.

Thank you, was the barest breath of her gratitude. *You have saved my life. I will always honor you for this.*

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Now it was time for Dhugal to approach his own father. Duncan was stunned, not sure whether he should be pleased or angry. He had been young once, and in love, so his speech wasn't all *that* scathing. Dhugal bore up pretty well through the lecture of the seven deadly sins, especially lust, and the virtues of self-control. A little bit about the gravity and sacredness of marriage was thrown in for good measure, but by the time Duncan came to a close he was grinning like a page boy, congratulating his son and whipping vestments out of a trunk. Dhugal breathed a huge sigh of relief, for his father had taken things rather well.

The wedding was held in the royal chapel, with Mairona, Meraude, and Richenda attending the bride. Ailín was thrilled and glowed with excitement to have three such great ladies present. Kelson, Nigel, and Morgan stood with Dhugal as Duncan presided. Her father Geoffrey looked like he wasn't sure if he approved of the proceedings or not, but he brightened considerably when the ceremony was over and the king embraced his daughter, kissing her on the cheek. By the time they had all withdrawn to a private celebration in the king's apartments he was the most jovial of them all. After all, Dhugal had been the most powerful bachelor left in Gwynedd, and his daughter was now the wife of the king's blood brother. Not a bad match for a simple lord's daughter, and he intended to use it to expand his own influence. Too bad Dhugal had other ideas of making sure that Geoffrey would have no authority beyond his small estates, and never again have hand over his daughter.

Due to the late hour, the celebration was a short one, and soon Ailín was brought to Dhugal's chamber to be prepared. Kelson took the opportunity of her absence and the free-flowing wine to get revenge for all the taunts he had endured from Dhugal during his wedding feast while he waited for Mairona to be made ready. Dhugal returned them good naturedly, proclaiming he no longer need be jealous of his blood brother's warm and soft nights, and insinuating that after their brief bout in the gardens, his bed may in fact be livelier than the king's. Of course Kelson had to retaliate, for his honor and Mairona's, and the jesting match had begun in earnest. When the time came for Dhugal to join his bride, Geoffrey and Kelson threw their arms around him and the three

sang noisily and off-key all the way to Dhugal's chamber. As they arrived, Mairona shook her head indulgently, knowing exactly what they had been consuming in the ladies' absence.

"You know, Brother," Kelson snickered loudly. "There is an ancient law in Gwynedd called *Prima Nocte*. It gives a liege lord the right to sleep with his vassal's bride on her wedding night."

"You would not dare!" Dhugal hissed, whirling on the king.

"Do not worry." Mairona gave Dhugal a small smile, slipping her arm through Kelson's to pull him away. "If he so much as tries, you may have your way with the little pieces that are left when I am through. Unless my king has the need for children?"

"I was only jesting," Kelson frowned, pulling away.

"Then so was I," Mairona returned. "Come, everyone. We all have a busy day tomorrow. These two should be allowed a few moments' peace."

She shepherded everyone out of the room. When the door was safely closed and locked, she took Kelson by the waist and led him to his bedchamber. By the time they reached it, he had steadied considerably and shrugged off her assistance to pour the two of them goblets of plain water.

"I thought you were drunk," she told him, accepting a cup.

"I suppose I am. We shall know for certes in the morn," he replied with a grin. "I was only jesting with Dhugal, Mairí. I would never think of doing that."

"Of course not," she said simply, making sure he consumed all the water before taking his goblet away so she could unlace his tunic and pull it off. She undid her own dress then, tugging it off with his help until she stood in her shift. Her fingers then moved to the laces on his breeches, undoing them with unbearable slowness. Kelson sucked in his breath as her hands caressed in an excruciatingly delicious manner.

"What are you doing?" he asked. She moved her face closer until their cheeks kissed and her lips touched his ear.

"Teaching you why you were only teasing," she whispered.

"I am your willing pupil," he whispered back. The two of them left a trail of clothes on the way to the bed, where they savored the last privacy of any great length they would have before his departure.