

## *A Family Heirloom*

A Deryni Summer Challenge 2002 Tale

By: Jerry Maher

“Arise Duke of Cassan, Earl of Kierney” King Kelson said as he released the hands that were between his. The grinning new duke, Dhugal MacArdy-McLain, bowed his head and stood up, turned and bowed to the man who had just relinquished all his titles save two—that of Bishop and father. It had been at the king’s urging that Bishop Duncan McLain had surrendered his titles to Cassan and Kierney to his heir. Given the recent war in Meara, the king had chosen to come to Culdi to invest the Earl of Transha as Cassan’s newest Duke. The roar of approval was loud and joyous from those assembled in the hall; the men of Transha had even managed to sneak a drum and bagpipe into the assemblage and played them with fervor.

In the afternoon after a meeting with his new advisors, Dhugal and the king went walking through the gardens sipping on a tasty drink made from lemon water that had some sweetening added to it to aid in lessening the sharp taste of the lemon. “Camber was with us today.” The king commented after a time.

“Aye, I don’t know why he seems to take interest in us, and I don’t know that I particularly feel worthy of having a Saint’s attention.”

“Well, perhaps it was only because a Deryni holds Culdi once again. Camber was after all the Earl of Culdi before his sainthood. Maybe you will find some information about him in the old records if they weren’t destroyed.”

“Perhaps you’re right. I don’t like the feeling of having a saint peeking over my shoulder all the time. I wish we had been more successful on our quest”

“Yes but coming back from the dead has to count for something.” The king grew quiet and Dhugal could guess where his thoughts traveled. Another, unfortunate, aspect of the quest was that the king had lost his future bride to his cousin and though the cousin had died a traitor’s death, the bride refused to discuss remarriage. Dhugal wisely held his tongue and let the king have his moment. As they continued to walk toward the maze in the garden, the lord of Transha caught sight of a brightly colored sun hat moving through the maze. Dhugal wondered who was under the hat and prayed it wasn’t some lady come to have an “accidental” meeting with the king. It was far too early for the king to be able to put his mind on finding a new wife. Even his council saw his need for time to grieve though there were a few ladies who tried to get his attention. The hat continued to move in their general direction and Dhugal was tempted to steer the king away but Kelson continued to walk along in silence. The hat rounded the corner and beneath was a tall beautiful young woman that caused Dhugal to pause in sipping his drink. She had bright red hair, brighter than his, and grey eyes that matched the kings; she was carrying a single white lily. She paused to give the king a proper curtsy and hesitated when the king failed to notice her. Dhugal nudged the king at the same time flashing the young lady a smile and giving her a nod. The king pulled himself back from his own world and gave the lady a strained smile and nod. Fearing that would give the opening they lady was waiting for, Dhugal started to say something but to his surprise the lady returned their nods and continued on her way disappearing around the corner of the maze.

Shaking his head, he said, “Come on Kel, I need to go find the blacksmith and see how he is coming with shoeing your horse. We want to be able to leave for Coroth tomorrow don’t we, young Kelric won’t wait to be christened forever.”

Nodding in agreement, Kelson followed his foster brother.

They found the blacksmith, hammer in hand, getting ready to put the first of the horseshoes onto the horse. He promised to have the horse ready for their ride out the next day. Kelson seemed to be in somewhat better spirits as they headed back. He excused himself shortly thereafter; indicating he had some correspondence he wanted to send back to Nigel and wanted to rest before the formal reception that evening.

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Evening found Dhugal seated at the head of the high table with his father seated on his right at the insistence of the king who sat to his left. The dinner progressed well with the King and Duncan keeping the conversation light. Dhugal occasionally glanced around the room to see if the mystery lady was present but if she was she was hid from the main table. Kelson commented on how good the food and that he might have to see about stealing the cook for his own kitchens. At one point during the meal the king stood and lifting his cup full of a fruity grape wine toasted Cassan's new duke. As the dinner completed the musicians came forth and tables were moved to allow room for dancing. The king, putting on a brave face, came out to lead the first dance for if the king would not dance, no one would. As the dance ended, Dhugal bowed to his partner thanking her for the dance and was about to escort the king back to his father when he spied the young woman with bright red hair wearing a striking silk gown standing on the side chamber. He was sure she was the same woman from the garden and he wanted to find out more about her. As Kelson was already moving towards the tables pausing to converse with Caird and some of the Transha men, Dhugal changed his direction and moved toward the woman in question. As he approached her, he noticed her hair was fixed in a very striking style, held together by a very exquisite comb made from what appeared to be ivory.

"M'lady will you do me the honor of the next dance?" he asked as he approached her.

"How could any woman refuse the lord of the castle," she said, a slight smile coming to her lips.

"I suppose I am going to have to get use to that kind of reaction. Being a duke is a bit different from being the lord of a small earldom. In Transha rank is not something we don't worry about too much."

"I suppose that is so, it is the same in my homeland but then again Culdi wasn't always part of a dukedom."

Surprised by the comment Dhugal could only nod his head. He held out his hand to her and they proceeded out to the dance floor. Upon reaching the floor, they turned facing each other, she putting her left slipper forward and waited for the musicians to start the next dance. The dance was a lively one and the young woman was easily a match to Dhugal, responding easily to the turns, twists, and jumps of the dance.

Dhugal a little flushed as the dance ended, "Thank you for the dance, M'lady. Might I ask your name?"

"You may ask but does it really matter? After tonight we may never meet again."

"Aye, you may be right but I hope that is not the case. If you are from around here I am SURE we will see each other on occasion at least."

"As it happens, I am not from near here but only visiting a distant relative and have to return home tomorrow. You will be at Rhemuth at least some of the time for I cannot see the king allowing you to be away from court long, so even if I return occasionally it may only be a rare happenstance that we will both be here at the same time."

“Again, you are probably correct though I sincerely hope such is not the case.”

“M’lord, may I ask you a question? Are you not Deryni?”

So thought Dhugal *maybe this is why she won’t give me her name*. “Aye, on my father’s side. Why do you ask?”

“Curiosity I suppose. We had heard rumors even in my land and I was wondering about if the rumors were true and how you felt the people would respond when they found out.”

“I am not too worried. Laws have been changed, church laws have been changed, people will change. The people love my father a great deal so that should help.”

“Yes but the last Deryni to hold Culdi was a traitor wasn’t he?”

Taken aback for a moment, Dhugal said, “Well, my father was the last Deryni to hold Culdi, though I must admit that most didn’t know him as one and he is far from being a traitor. Before him, the last Deryni to hold Culdi as I recall was branded a heretic not a traitor.”

“Ah, you speak of the Earl Camber, I was thinking of his son and grandson. His son was labeled a traitor and executed by the last Festil king with the rest of the MacRorie clan also being branded traitors and the grandson was also labeled a traitor though to a Haldane king.”

“M’lady you seem to know more about Culdi than I do and I am her Duke. I should be insulted.” he said grinning. “Even so I find it hard to believe any descendant of Camber would play the Haldane’s false.”

“Well you have not been duke long so you can be excused. History has always been an interest of mine and my father indulged me. History has a way of being written from the view of those who write it and does not always reflect truth. I, like you, find it hard to believe that any member of Camber’s family would be a traitor to the Haldanes - not after they sacrificed so much to put the Haldanes back on the throne. Speaking of Haldane’s, your king seems to be very reserved. Not what I would expect of a Haldane.”

“Kelson has been through much in the past year and an half what with losing his first wife and the War carried out last summer. His crown weighs heavy upon occasion.”

“Perhaps in time he will find someone to help share the weight.”

“I am sure he will but now is not the time for anyone to be offering.” he said hoping she would take the hint though he wouldn’t mind getting to know her better.

“Fear not M’lord MacArdy, I have no eyes for yon king. I simply worry for him. He is the first Haldane King that could openly be everything he is. Now if you will excuse me lord, the night grows late and I need to return to my lodgings. As I mentioned I will be departing for home tomorrow and need to finish packing. It was enjoyable talking to you. I hope we do meet again sometime.”

Dhugal would have had her tarry to see what else she might know of Camber and to learn more about this fascinating woman but remembering her comment about not refusing the lord of the manor, he decided to bid her a good night and watched her depart. He then returned to the king and his father where they both kidded him about letting the young lady go without at least learning her name.

Morning found Dhugal back at the table enjoying an early breakfast. He wanted to ensure that all was ready when Kelson rose and decided to leave. As he sat eating, one of the servants approached carrying a small box.

“A lady brought it. Said it was a gift for you and asked that I present it to you.”

“ A Lady you say, what did she look like?” Suspecting he already knew as he took the box and set it down in front of him.

“Aye M’Lord, a very beautiful lady with red hair. She said it was a gift for the new lord of Culdi. She then left. She was dressed for riding so it may be hard to catch her.”

Dhugal absently shook his head indicating that it wasn’t necessary, at the same time he took the note off the box.

*It is good that one of our own holds Culdi again.*

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Inside the box he found a simple Earl’s coronet. Not daring to hope on what he held, he put his hand in the box, opening to whatever might happen, placed his hand on the coronet and saw.....