

## ✠ Chapter 13 ✠

Mairona had been reading in a window seat, a history on the very brief Camber cult in Meara in hopes of discovering more about Druimkyriel. It was another rare find, and leave it to Kelson to have obtained it. He seemed to have gotten his hands on every manuscript mentioning Camber's name that existed within his realm, and quite a few from beyond his borders. Not much had escaped the persecutions, and certainly dozens if not hundreds of works pertaining to Camber and the Deryni in general had been destroyed in hate and fear, but with that in consideration Kelson's collection was sizable, even for a Deryni king. Scholarly heaven, and better yet, he encouraged her to read all she could. What a rare heart she had captured, one who used her stubbornness and strong will to his advantage rather than trying to break it. Of course, she wouldn't have settled for anything less. Smiling, she forced her attention back to the history in her hands. She hoped to find some more information about the church holding the Camber relic, but so far there was nothing. That was both disappointing and surprising, since a relic would be invaluable to Camber's resurging cult. Maybe it had never really existed.

The door opened, disturbing Mairona from her studies. It was Saraid, returned from the marketplace and her search for cloth to make her own gown for the royal wedding. Even in the dead of winter, Rhemuth's market still traded, though mostly through indoor shops and with limited goods.

"Did you find anything?" Mairona asked.

"No. The weather has slowed or stopped shipments of cloth to the city," Saraid said. Her mistress could tell she was holding something back.

"You did see something you liked, or I am not Deryni," Mairona told her, letting the manuscript fall on her lap. Saraid ducked her head, embarrassed.

"There was a beautiful pale blue silk at one merchant's shop, and there was cotton and wool to match," she said to the floor. "It was of high quality, very expensive."

Mairona thought how much blue favored Saraid. It went well with her light brown hair and rosy complexion, and made her bright blue eyes stand out. "Saraid, if I am marrying the King of Gwynedd, surely I could manage to get you a little cloth."

Saraid's face lifted, but she was ever so modest. "My lady, you have other concerns..."

"All of which are being paid by the royal treasury," Mairona interrupted with a wave of her hand. "The chests I brought from Druimfada can pay for a good deal more than one dress. I will not hear any argument. You have served far too well for me not to grant you this. Take what money you need in the morning and have that dress made. And after you buy that beautiful cloth, do not skimp on the tailoring."

"Thank you, Mairona," Saraid breathed, her face glowing.

"How could I allow my favorite attendant to dress like a beggar when I wed the king?" Mairona smiled. "Now what else did you look at? I see something there in your hand."

"I did find something else," Saraid confessed, giving her package to Mairona. It was heavy for its small size, probably metal, enclosed up in cloth rags. Unwrapping it, Mairona found a simple yet elegant cloak clasp of high workmanship.

"A Bremagni design, is it not? 'Tis beautiful, and will go well with your dress, I am certain." Mairona tried to hand it back to Saraid, but she refused.

"I did not mean it for myself, my lady. It would make a generous gift to the Queen Mother. She is Bremagni, and the clasp is plain enough to suit her tastes."

Mairona fingered the silver clasp, thinking of her suggestion. "I do not think this will greatly improve the queen's opinion of me."

"What harm could it do?" Saraid asked.

"Not much, I suppose," Mairona confessed. "I do not think she could dislike me any more than she already does. Very well, then. Present it to the queen with my compliments, would you? I doubt she would welcome my presence."

"Aye, my lady," Saraid smiled, taking the clasp back and wrapping it up. "I shall do it at once."

\* \* \* \* \*

"My lord," Ivo called, entering the king's study. "Her Highness the Queen wishes to see you." Kelson sighed, leaning forward on the table and rubbing his temples. He was in no mood to deal with his mother. Preparations for a campaign against Torenth had already given him a demon of a headache, and she was liable to make it worse.

"Shall I tell her to return at your convenience?" the young squire asked, observing the king's reaction.

"No, show my dear lady mother in," the king said in exasperation as he smoothed stray raven hairs behind his ears. Jehana entered regally, dressed in the pale gray she favored so much. Kelson nodded, but didn't rise to greet her.

"Kelson, I wish to speak with you about your bride," she started.

His temper was already short, and this was a subject he wished she hadn't brought up. "Let me guess. She is Deryni. Deryni are evil and corrupt. She will damn my soul to hell, which, incidentally, it already is due to the Deryni blood you gave me. Mother, in case you have not realized yet, the Church is now welcoming Deryni into its ranks, even practicing Deryni. Why do you oppose the Church's teachings?"

"There are plenty of human girls who have much to recommend themselves," Jehana argued, pointedly ignoring the route Kelson had turned to.

"And not one of those human girls interest me. I love Mairona, Mother. She *will* be my queen."

"How can you love this Deryni?"

"As my father loved you," Kelson retorted, leaning back in his chair. He was quickly coming to the end of his endurance. "How much longer are you going to deny what you are? You are using your Deryni powers even now, by shielding yourself so tightly that I cannot even surface read you."

Jehana looked down at the floor, struggling for self-control, then lifted her eyes back up to meet her son's. She threw a small bundle down on the table in front of him. "What does she hope to gain by giving me this? Does she think she can buy my approval?"

Kelson leaned forward to pick up the bundle and unwrapped it. In the center of protective rags, he found a beautiful, elegant, yet plain silver clasp of Bremagni design. Something his mother would like and wear, if it hadn't been the gift of a Deryni. "Mairona does not buy anyone. In a little over a fortnight, she will be my wife and your daughter by marriage. Did you ever consider that the clasp might be a simple gesture of goodwill?"

"You love her?" Jehana whispered.

"Aye. She will make an excellent consort for a Deryni king, although she will undoubtedly be overwhelmed at first. I am sure she would appreciate your experience and advice." Kelson refused to let his mother goad him to the point of losing control of his temper, but he couldn't help throwing out a little barb of his own.

"Are you asking me to help her?" Jehana asked in shocked disbelief.

"Why not? A Deryni queen to assist a Deryni queen. I tire of your argument, Mother. Simply being Deryni is not going to damn you, or me, or Mairona, or anyone else. It is high time you realize that." He leaned over to place the clasp on the far end of the table, near where his mother was standing. "Now you will excuse me, for I have work to do. My patience is in short supply today, and I suggest you do not test it further." He leveled his Haldane gaze on Jehana, eyes just barely controlling the smoldering underneath. He looked so much like his father Brion at that moment that she had to look away.

Bowing her head, she picked up the cloak clasp and quietly left. Kelson took a few deep breaths to calm himself before returning to the tasks in front of him.