

✦ Chapter 16 ✦

The next morning, after Mass had been attended, Kelson provided an intimate breakfast in his quarters for Mairona, only his two squires attending. He wanted to give her a brief respite away from people before he convened court to execute the four remaining soldiers. Then they must start interviewing the guard. The whole guard, including his personal troops. Even with all the Deryni at the king's disposal, it would take some time.

Mairona was doing well, all things considered. The blurring of the previous night's memory and a sound sleep did a world of good. She sat to Kelson's right, rather than across from him, needing his proximity. There was still occasionally a flash of a haunted look in her eyes that she tried to hide by retreating into the veil she had donned for morning Mass, but that flash quickly disappeared when Kelson tried to make her smile. He worked particularly hard to keep her in good humor this morning. She seemed to be chattering endlessly about relatively trivial matters to keep her mind off last night's events.

"I do not know what to do with Saraid," Mairona said. "She has been so busy worrying about my wedding gown that I almost had to order her to go look for silk for her own dress! And she loves going to markets! She had plenty of money, and found some cloth she likes, but instead of buying it she purchased a silver brooch she thought I should give to your mother. With her own money. I know she is excited about the cloth she found. 'Tis blue, which looks quite good on her, and she wants it very badly. She is so modest, though, that I practically had to shove her hands into my treasury. Then I had to throw her out the door with orders not to return until she had bought enough cloth to make her a dress."

"So that is where the brooch came from," Kelson mused. "I had an interesting conversation with my mother about that. It was a good choice. A beautiful Bremagni design, but simple enough she would like it." He stabbed a piece of dried apple and offered it to Mairona.

"You mean she did not throw it in the fire immediately?" She accepted the fruit from his blade and munched on it delicately. "It comes from a damned Deryni, after all. How do you handle her?"

Kelson smiled ruefully. "By the time it was discovered we were Deryni, I had just become king and could tell her with impunity to leave me alone. Six years later, she is not sure what is right anymore. Her first instinct is to hate us, and our abilities, but that hatred and fear have no foundation now. I keep praying that some day she will change her mind. She is already less vehement about the evils of being Deryni than she used to be. Now, you have told me all about Saraid's dress. What about your gown?"

"You will not get me that easily!" she smiled. "I told you I want it to be a surprise. The tailors have almost completed it, and all that should remain then is the decoration. The jewelers are also doing a wonderful job. I think you will approve." Looking him in the eye, she popped the last bit of apple in her mouth.

"It had better be spectacular, for all it is costing me. The royal coffers are large, but they are not bottomless," he teased. Suddenly she grew apprehensive.

"I am sorry, my lord. I did not think the cost was extraordinary for an event of this importance. If you wish, it could be reduced—"

"I am only jesting," he laughed, resting his hand on her shoulder. Her eyes turned humorous again. Thank God she wasn't intimidated by him, after last night.

"Well, for certes I could find a nice, gray wool that would suffice, and be much less expensive, as well," she continued.

"You would be radiant, even then," Kelson grinned, "but what would Gwynedd think of its king if his bride dressed like a beggar?"

She had a reply on the tip of her tongue, but was interrupted by a rap on the door. Ivo opened it to the Queen Mother. *Lord Christ, give me patience*, Mairona prayed. Kelson looked perturbed as he rose to greet Jehana.

"Good morning, Mother," he said, kissing her dutifully on the cheek. Mairona stood and curtsied, surprised at the queen's appearance. Her dress wasn't the gray or white she normally favored, but rather the palest blue. She still wore a veil, but her hair was visible at the edges.

"My lady," Mairona greeted.

"Would you join us for breakfast?" Kelson invited. Jehana shook her head.

"I do not wish to eat," she replied.

"Then excuse us if we continue. We have a long day ahead." Kelson sat back down at the table, motioning Mairona to do the same. Jehana stood for a few moments, but started feeling uncomfortable, so she sat at the table opposite Mairona. She didn't touch the food, though.

"I heard what happened last night," the queen said softly. Kelson watched anxiously as Mairona's face went white.

"Your son performed a masterful task of saving my honor and my life," she whispered. "I am very blessed." Kelson reached out to squeeze Mairona's hand, giving her a comforting smile.

"Have you thought about why this happened?" the queen asked. Mairona bowed her head, tears spilling through her lashes.

"Mother, this is not the time or the place for your old Deryni argument," Kelson told her forcefully. "It has no basis but old fear and superstition."

"This is not proof enough?" Jehana asked.

Mairona took in a deep breath, determined to counter the queen with Scripture. "God alone is my rock and salvation, my secure height; I shall never fall." Suddenly her composure changed, as if her body had been usurped, and her head raised to hold the Queen Mother in an eerie, penetrating gaze. The words that came out of Mairona's mouth began with the Scripture she intended, but then changed to another path. Her voice was unnatural, otherworldly, and it sent chills down Kelson's and Jehana's backs.

"How long will you set upon people, beating them down?" she intoned. "Did you experience so many things in vain?—if indeed it was in vain. Remember, then, the one who supplies the Spirit to you and works mighty deeds among you. For what are the powers of the Deryni, but gifts from God to work through the Spirit?"

Suddenly whatever had taken her left, but not before she got the faint impression of a silvered head, bowed over a gray robe, smiling down comfortingly at her.

Jehana looked like she had been struck. An old memory came unbidden to haunt her consciousness. A silvery, cowed head, and hands reaching out to her, saying, "*Jehana, Jehana, why do you persecute me?*" She shook her head, trying to clear the vision, but it wouldn't go away. It

grew bigger, drew closer, pleading with her. There was no escape, nowhere to run. Jehana screamed, begging the apparition to leave her in peace. *Are you really at peace?* it asked gently.

"Mother! Mother, are you alright?" Kelson shook her shoulders, and the image disappeared from before her eyes. Jehana looked up at him, her face drained of all color. "What happened to you? To both of you?" he asked.

"She used her Deryni magic on me!" The queen pointed an accusing finger at Mairona. At her allegation, Kelson stepped away to stand by Mairona, laying a hand and his support on her shoulder.

"Truth-Read me, Madam. I know you are able," Mairona replied indignantly, though with a touch of wonder in her voice. "I do not know what happened. It certainly was *not* of my creation."

Jehana did Truth-Read her. If Mairona hadn't done it— no. It couldn't be! She made a little cry as she slumped over the table.

"Mairona, what happened?" Kelson asked, leaning over his mother again.

"I do not know for certain," she said, her voice full of fearful awe. "It was as if someone were looking through my eyes, speaking through my voice. And then, when it left, I saw a glimpse of a man with silver-blond hair. He smiled at me. Kelson, what is happening?"

"It sounds like you had a vision of St. Camber. I would like to read you later," he said, and Mairona wondered at his casualness. There was awe and respect in his voice, but no surprise. Jehana started weeping at the mention of Camber's name. Mairona removed the golden circlet holding her veil in place and pulled the cloth from her head, offering it to the queen. Kelson started a bit, remembering a similar scene in a ravaged abbey, Rothana giving her veil to Princess Janniver, who was sobbing in anguish.

"Mother, what happened to you?" he asked.

"He came to me," she wept quietly, pressing her face against the veil. "He kept coming to me, reaching out his hands, and I could not escape." Her voice caught in her throat, and she clutched at Mairona's veil. Kelson rested his hands on her shoulders that were shuddering with silent sobs.

"Have you thought about why this happened?" Kelson asked her softly, echoing what she had said earlier.

"You twist my words," Jehana cried.

"Do I?"

Jehana just shook her head, keeping her face buried in the veil. Feeling a wave of pity, Mairona rested her hand on the queen's arm and began to tell her a story.

"My lady, my mother was Deryni, but like you she did not discover it until she had grown. Like you, she had been taught to fear and hate Deryni, that they were evil. She believed that very strongly until I was born. I happened to be Deryni, also, but she could not understand how such an innocent babe could carry the taint of the devil. That day my mother started questioning her beliefs. Later, when my mother was on her deathbed, she actually begged my father to see my Deryni powers trained. I had turned into Druimfada's darling, and she hoped that if people saw I was Deryni, that it would help alleviate their fear.

"Now, my lady, look at your son. Remember the first time you held him in your arms. Was he evil, then, as an infant? You saw him grow as a boy, and you know his deeds and actions. Can you truly say he is evil? Do you believe he is wicked?"

"There is a difference between evil and wickedness," Jehana sniffled.

"Do you believe he is either?" Mairona asked, determined that the Queen mother would not talk her way out of this.

"The Church said Deryni are evil," Jehana insisted.

"They used to say, Madam. Now they say otherwise. Do you believe Kelson is evil?"

Jehana found she couldn't answer the question, for fear of what she might have to admit. "What I believe is not necessarily Truth," she whispered instead.

"But you believe Deryni are evil. By your own words, that is not necessarily Truth. Now, please answer me, my lady. Is Kelson evil?"

"No." It came out as a tortured, nearly inaudible whimper. Kelson looked very surprised.

"So, Kelson is Deryni, and he is not evil," Mairona continued. "Being Deryni does not make a man good or evil. It is a gift, and like all gifts can be used either in the service of our Lord Christ or of the Dark One. Whether a Deryni is good or evil depends on how he chooses to use the gifts with which he was blessed. Most choose to serve our Lord Christ. It is only the few who do otherwise that have created all the fear and hatred."

Jehana opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Mairona and Kelson remained silent, allowing the queen to think through what just happened. Could she really have just said that? No. It was clear, the Church had said Deryni are evil. But they did not say it anymore. Mairona's words made the queen remember when, a little more than twenty years ago, a newborn babe with a shock of black hair had been presented to King Brion, who grinned almost foolishly, and after a few moments laid his new son on the bed next to his exhausted wife. The infant Kelson had yawned, and was sleeping so innocently. She had felt such a surge of joy and love for this new child laying next to her, but she had not known then that the child was born with a Deryni taint. The queen's quiet weeping gradually tapered off until she just sat, staring soundlessly at the window across the room.

"I should not have come," she suddenly said, stiffening into formal posture.

Kelson turned her to face him. "It pleases me that you did." He embraced her warmly, very different from the stiff, formal reception he had given her for six years. He smiled at her, not the reluctant, exasperated, schooled expression she had seen for *six years*. She almost started crying again as her own embrace warmed, holding close the man who had once been the impossibly tiny infant laid by her side. Her little boy had been lost forever six years ago, but maybe she could find her son once more.

Yet that son was Deryni, through her own taint. What did that mean, now? Was it evil, or not? Suddenly apprehensive, the Queen Mother pulled away.

"I should return to my quarters." Jehana said. Kelson stood back.

"Good day, Mother," Kelson smiled.

"Good day, Madam," Mairona followed.

"Yes. Good day." Jehana gave her son a timid smile, then hurriedly left the room. Kelson stared after her, amazed.

"Congratulations," he breathed to Mairona. "I think somebody finally got through to her."

She dismissed his praise. "She was already unsure of what was right and wrong. I only tried to nudge that conflict in the proper direction."

"You succeeded where everyone else failed, and if the seed you planted takes root my life will be a great deal more peaceful. Oh, Mairona, I love you." Laughing, he spun Mairona around. She looked up at him with glowing eyes, and without thinking he bent down to kiss her, until a glimmer of anxiety flashed across her face. He understood all too well why.

"I am sorry," he whispered. "I—"

She silenced him by pulling his face down, kissing him firmly on the lips. "I will *not* be afraid of you, Kelson," she said forcefully. "*No one* is going to take you away from me."

He pulled her closer, completely enfolding her in his arms. "God help the man who tries," he murmured. "Now, if we want to finish eating, we had better do so now. There is a busy day ahead of us."

"Aye, there is." Her eyes grew hard, thinking of the court and trial ahead. But then they warmed again when she looked to Kelson. This was a very special morning, and the times they had alone, together, were few. As time wore on they would become fewer still. It was the curse of the crown, and there wasn't anything that could be done to change it, so she decided to make the most of what little time they did have.