

The Most Reluctant Bridegroom

A Deryni Summer 2002 Challenge Tale

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Rhemuth 1633

Albin Haldane, Prince of Meara, Lord of the Purple March and heir to the throne of Gwynedd, shrank back against the wall of the stable and held his breath. From the cobbled courtyard beyond he could hear shouts and cries of welcome. The sounds set his teeth on edge.

He risked a quick glance around the doorframe. Gilded carriages stood before the palace steps. Outriders were dismounting, while footmen held the doors and waited to assist the noble occupants out. The yard was full of the rustle of silk, the snap of leather, and the tinkling of silver bells on the women's gowns.

Sweet Saint Camber! His father well and truly meant to kill him!

What ho! The voice of his closest friend and companion, Jathan Morgan, echoed in his mind. *I've found you at last! Fifty shillings are mine.*

**Fifty? Is that all the king offers?* Albin left his concealment and gave his friend a broad grin. *I would have thought it would be a hundred at least.*

"I wager it might be five hundred if you keep the old man fuming for another hour." Jathan leaned his tall frame against a stall and grinned. "So what led you here? We've been set to search the gardens, the kitchens, the library --"

"Don't be daft. He knows I would not be in the library."

Jathan laughed. "Precisely what I said, but my lord father pointed out that would make it the perfect hiding place for you, since none of us would look there. I even checked the shooting range. Nearly got my head blown off by some idiot who didn't know how to handle his pistol."

Albin laughed as Jathan rubbed at one ear. "Did you set the fool on his arse for it?"

"Would have liked to, but I couldn't. It was your brother." Jathan struck a pose of exaggerated hauteur, his lips pursed into a bow, his blonde brows raised nearly to the unruly locks of his hair.

"So where did you get those clothes?" Jathan plucked at the sleeve of the tattered shirt Albin wore.

The prince shrugged. "Found them in the laundry. I suppose they belong to a stable man. I couldn't hide in here in a velvet doublet now, could I?"

"Albin, this is ridiculous." Jathan propped one long leg against a bench and fixed him with a serious look. "They are only women."

"Only women? Bloodsucking leeches, you mean. Twittering and simpering and waving their bosoms at me everywhere I turn!" Albin sank onto the bench and threw up his hands. "It's like some sort of demented cattle show with me as the prize stud. I've had enough of it."

"So you said the last time. The lady was most offended, as I remember."

"And did you see the lady's portrait? That painter ought to be hung for treason, as should the model he found to impersonate his subject." Albin shuddered. "That had to be the first dowager princess I've ever met. If she had a tooth in her head it was a false one."

"All right, so teeth are important to you. Would you care to check mine?"

Albin pretended to examine Jathan's mouth. "Very nice indeed." He sank to one knee. "My darling, would you do me the very great honor of becoming my most beloved consort?"

When he caught Jathan's hand and kissed it, Jathan leapt back, laughing hysterically. He knocked a bridle from its peg and it fell in a clatter of bit and rings. The noise nearly drowned out their laughter.

"Well enough, my prince. I do see your point." Jathan caught himself on the edge of the stall and held his belly as he gasped for breath. "But you must marry sometime, you know. You are nearly twenty and three. You've lasted longer than any of your predecessors, even the renowned Kelson."

"And look who is giving advice to me. The renown lecher who has yet managed to evade the clutches of every eager mother who isn't chasing after me."

Jathan's face fell in a look so exaggerated Albin nearly choked on a new bout of laughter. "Forgive me, my prince. I feel it is my duty to give our fathers something in this world to agree on."

"That they despise their sons?" Albin leaned against the stall, his laughter subsiding. His brother's big gray gelding eyed him placidly as it munched hay.

Why can't Father see that I am not like him? The thought came out before Albin could stop it. He glanced at his friend. Jathan returned a wave of understanding and sympathy.

He's given his life to duty, to the complete lack of everything else. Now that he was talking seriously Albin decided to bring out all the feelings he'd kept inside. The stable seemed a safe place, where they were observed only by the horses. *I doubt he even noticed when Mother died. Or that he was ever young enough to want to enjoy life just a little.*

Let's be fair, Albin. Jathan joined his prince on the stall. *You and I enjoy life more than a little. Our fathers can't accept that we've got at least forty years ahead of us to be serious when they are reaching the end of their lives.*

At least yours gives you a bit of trust. You've had command of the Spirit for four years now.

Only because I always bring back a good cargo and a safe crew. Jathan grinned rakishly. *Did I tell you about the last trip we took? We laid over in Tralia to wait out a blow, and there was this little place near the docks. I kid you not, this wench ---*

"Your pardon." A sweet voice with a Bremagne lilt interrupted their conversation.

Startled, Albin turned so quickly he nearly tripped over his own feet. A woman stood in the doorway, swathed in the soft blue and white robes of a novice nun. A few coppery curls escaped the confines of her wimple, and from the flush on her cheeks she had been exerting herself more than most.

She glanced at him before turning her attention to Jathan. If he'd ever seen eyes that green, Albin swore he'd sell his favorite stallion for hides and glue.

Then, to his surprise, she gave Jathan a respectful curtsy. "Forgive me, my lord. I came in search of a stableman. We have only just arrived and need assistance with one of our horses."

Jathan's smile widened. Albin realized the cause of the young sister's confusion. While he was dressed in common linen, Jathan wore a studded leather jerkin and velvet breeches. A heavy silver ring set with carigorns graced his hand. Fine leather boots covered his legs. He looked the nobleman in every respect.

Jathan cast Albin a mischievous look, then extended his hand to the novice. "Your interruption is most welcome, Sister. I am certain my . . . boy. . .," his grin widened, "can assist you."

What do you think you are doing? Albin fairly shouted in Jathan's mind.

Giving you the chance to view the prizes before you meet them formally.

And did it never occur to you that I will be recognized the moment we walk out that door?

Don't be ridiculous. With all the confusion out there they wouldn't notice if Cinhil I rose up and walked out of the crypt. Jathan gave Albin a mental nudge. "What are you waiting for, squire? The lady asked for help and we are going to aid her."

Albin followed the little nun into the courtyard. With graceful steps she slipped through the crowd and led him to a small party, apparently newly arrived. From the disarray of their rich clothing and the complete lack of any baggage he realized something serious must have happened.

His companion took the reins of a sorrel mare and motioned Albin closer. "Cinnamon is limping."

Given the state of these travelers she was worried about a horse? Albin shrugged off his confusion at the nun's priorities and approached the mare. At least this was something he could manage. He loved horses.

He examined the mare's legs one by one. The problem was easy enough to find. A shoe had come loose and fallen away, leaving the hoof bare on the cobblestones.

He fetched a small hammer, nails, a heavy blade for trimming the hoof, and a spare shoe from the stables. When he returned, Jathan stood between two young women, whose elegant dresses looked as if they'd been run on a mill wheel. Both were simpering in fine style. The sight nearly made Albin retch.

The nun smiled when she saw where his gaze wandered. "My sisters," she explained before he could voice a question. "They had the very good fortune to meet Prince Albin upon their arrival. I fear they have high hopes."

The real Prince Albin raised an eyebrow. Behind pursed lips he muttered something so foul he'd be on his knees for a solid week doing penance. Then again, that might keep him from the clutches of who knew how many twittering idiots.

He managed to sound civil when he spoke again. "Your sisters are here bent on matchmaking?"

"As is every other lovely young maid within traveling distance."

"Not every one." The remark slipped out before he could catch himself. To cover the error he braced the hoof between his knees and shoved several nails into his mouth for safekeeping. That should stop him from saying anything else stupid.

She actually giggled. "Nearly all, then. Nothing attracts hopefuls like an eligible prince."

Albin concentrated on trimming the rough edges from the hoof with a heavy knife. Fortunately the task required complete concentration so he could not watch his best friend playing his part or count the freckles on the little nun's nose.

"Tell me, what do you think of your master?" Both her question and her hesitant voice made him glance up.

As he was done with the knife anyway, Albin tucked it into his belt and picked up the horseshoe. He gathered the nails in his other hand so he could answer without sounding like an idiot even if he felt like one. "He's a complicated fellow. Often gets himself into more trouble than he can handle." He shot Jathan a scolding glare.

The little nun took the nails from him. She had to bend over to hold them where he could easily reach. "I am concerned about how he will treat my sisters, should he wed one of them."

One glance at her exquisite eyes told him she was truly concerned for her kinswomen. Albin felt like the veriest clod. He'd been marveling over the pattern of freckles on her upturned nose.

He could not taunt her with vague answers. "I would not worry overmuch, Sister. Should the prince, by some miracle, agree to marry any of these assembled maidens I know he will be most gentle with his bride."

Relief shone through the soft smile she gave him. "I feared it might be otherwise. You see, our mother died when Margareth and Elspeth were still too young to remember her. Father does his best, but his mind is often elsewhere as it should be, on the affairs of state. Daughters have little place in the greater matters."

"Nor do sons." The words came out under Albin's breath.

"I beg your pardon?"

K'dassa! Her hearing was good.

"Forgive me, Sister. I was merely commenting that we are having this conversation and have not introduced ourselves." He set the first nail and stretched out his mind. It was easy enough to part the tough layers of the hoof so the nail settled smoothly with only a few taps of the hammer.

She smiled again. It seemed the sun danced over her face despite the soft gray clouds overhead.

Albin forgot what he was doing as he watched her watching him. The second and third nails went in well, in spite of his inattention. On the fourth nail, however, his luck ran out. He mashed his finger soundly with the hammer.

His finger stung nearly as much as his pride. The little nun's eyes twinkled with mirth.

He dropped the hoof, noting as he did that the nail was securely set despite the accident.

She caught his hand in both of hers and examined it, apparently not at all put off by the amount of dirt the horse had left on him. "It doesn't look bad, you might soak it in some cold water, if you can, to bring down the swelling."

Then she turned and walked toward her sisters, her hands folded demurely in front of her.

As Albin turned back toward the stables his foot caught one remaining horseshoe nail left in the dirt. The little nun must have dropped it when she examined his injured finger.

He snatched it up and stuck it in his belt for safekeeping.

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The silver studs on Jathan's leather jerkin snapped against the wainscoting as he slid slowly down the wall, he laughed so hard he held his midsection, shaking all the while and gasping for breath.

"It's not that funny," Albin muttered. "Jesu, Jathan, how can you laugh. I finally find a woman I could spend the rest of my life looking at and she's a nun!"

"I'm . . . sorry . . . Al. Truly, I . . . am." Jathan settled to the floor and stopped laughing with obvious effort. His long, deep breaths echoed in the still gallery. "It's just that I've never, ever seen you like this before. You look like someone hit you over the head with a church."

"Not a bad comparison." Albin ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. Now that he had removed the tight queue his hair hung in loose curls to his shoulders. "An, Jathan, what am I going to do?"

"Who knows? Perhaps the lady will not be so unwilling as you think." Jathan leaned against the wall and glanced up at the portraits lining the wainscoted length of the gallery. "Ever wonder what they would say?"

Albin considered his ancestors. The paintings gazed at him with universal disdain. At the moment he was looking at his great-great-grandfather, Rhys III. The man had the same thin nose, sagging jowls and narrow eyes as Albin's father, and brother. Only the color of those eyes resembled Albin's. All the Haldanes seemed to share an odd, smoky gray shade.

Beside Rhys III was Albin II, who, when his portrait was painted, seemed to have gone to fat. The face beside him showed the heavy influence of Festil blood in a narrow face, long nose and wavy hair.

Albin walked down the gallery, contemplating the portraits. Each one gave him a look devoid of passion, joy or life. The master painters had not managed to capture the soul of the subject, not even once.

Then he paused near the end of the gallery. Kelson I, dead more than four hundred years, looked out of a heavy dark frame. This king's face showed the same lines of age as all the rest though he had been barely 30 when he died.

Not much older than I am now, Albin thought.

Still, Kelson's eyes showed life. The master had captured tiny flecks of gold and silver amid the gray. For just a moment Albin thought the face in the portrait might smile.

Albin? What are you thinking? Jathan's mental voice nudged him out of his reverie.

"Just wondering what he would have done."

The door at the far end of the gallery crashed open. Before Albin turned he knew his father stood there, in his usual towering rage. "Albin Brion Cinhill Haldane! I want a word with you!"

Albin glanced at the far end of the gallery as Jathan rose, poised for flight. Unfortunately, that path was blocked by the brawny form of Jathan's father, the Duke of Corwyn.

We're up for it now. Jathan's voice held a hint of mental laughter.

Can you not be serious? Albin winced as he watched their fathers advance like a pair of boars on wounded hounds.

What can they do? Disinherit us?

Nay, my friend. Disembowel us. Jathan's mirth was infectious. By the time their fathers reached them, Albin was fighting back laughter.

He gave his father a respectful nod. "You wished to see me, Sire?"

King Donal Haldane braced his fists on his broad hips and faced his son. His curled wig shuddered in time with his sagging jowls and quivering chin. Clearly he was furious.

"What were you thinking?" Donal waved a be-ringed finger in Albin's face. "I had to make excuses to Our royal guests! You knew you were to stand beside me to welcome them!"

"Forgive me, Sire. I thought ---"

"You did not think! You rarely do, save of your own pleasure!" Donal lifted his chin and glared down his long nose. "I am sore tempted to pass the Crown of Gwynedd to your brother, Alroy. He at least can manage to fill his duty when necessary."

"As you will, Sire." Albin bowed again and fought the seething anger that threatened to burst from his mouth in a rush of unwise words. "I would be quite content with Meara and the March."

"Hhrumph!" If anything, King Donal seemed more furious than before. "I will do no such thing. Never, **never** has a prince of Gwynedd shirked his duty regardless of his desires! Our ancestor, the great Cinhil, did give up his heart's calling for service to the Crown. Since then every one of your predecessors has placed the needs of Gwynedd ahead of his own wants. Every one until you!"

I think we overdid ourselves this time, Albin sent in a tightly focused thought to Jathan.

Why did you not say something at the time? Jathan's reply came in the same tight thought.

Why didn't you? Between his father's ridiculous image and his friend's mirth Albin was hard pressed not to laugh in the King's face.

Jathan gave a mental shrug. *I was preoccupied overdoing myself.*

"Do you not realize your line must be secured with heirs?" Donal ceased shaking his finger at his son and concentrated on glaring. "Do you think you can wait forever? You will wed one of the ladies here in two weeks' time, mark my words! If I have to have you dragged to the cathedral bound in chains, by God's favor you will do as I tell you!"

"Why? So that I can be trapped into the same sort of union you and Mother shared? Or, rather, did not share?" Albin faced his father, his eyes narrowing as he seized his chance. Jathan and the Duke of Corwyn were forgotten as he finally said things he'd been holding back for years.

"Did the pair of you share more than whatever coupling was necessary to produce Alroy and I? Did you even notice when she died? Do you think of her ever, now that she is gone?"

Donal's bowed lips thinned. "My queen is not part of this."

"She definitely is. For God's sake, Sire, you refer to her as your queen. Was she ever more than that? Was she ever a wife?"

"And what business is it of yours?"

Albin sighed in exasperation. "I want more than a queen out of a lifetime union. I want a wife. Someone who shares my interests, someone whose company I would choose over all others."

"You want to fall in love."

"Yes. Is that so much to ask?"

"So do so. Now." Donal pointed to the gallery door. "Pick one of those lovely ladies and fall in love with her. It should not be so difficult."

How could his father be so dense? Albin turned away, the weight of the difference between them making him stagger. "If you think it so simple we have no more to talk about."

"I will agree we have no more to discuss. You will bathe yourself and prepare to welcome our guests in proper fashion. On the morrow we are taking the ladies on a picnic. You will make yourself agreeable as I wish, and I will hear no more complaints."

Donal snapped his fingers. Four guardsmen appeared in the doorway. "To make certain you adhere to my wishes you will remain under guard until tomorrow's revelry. Have I made myself clear?"

Albin glanced at Jathan. Jathan shrugged, his lips turning up as the Duke of Corwyn seized his shoulder and thrust him down the opposite end of the gallery.

There was no way to escape his fate now. Albin allowed the guards to take him to his chamber, feeling as if he were being led to the scaffold.

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The sun shone from a sky of clear summer blue on the bedecked field where the royal court and their guests gathered for the picnicking and games the next day. Silk and satin banners fluttered in the light breeze. The large pavilions were bedecked with flowers and trailing ribbons in Haldane scarlet and gold.

It was a fine day to ruin his life.

Albin tugged at the white leather gloves encasing his hands. He felt as trussed up as a Christmas goose. His father's squires had dressed him in a brocade coat over a ruffled silk shirt and breeches of gold-shot scarlet velvet. White silk hose encased his legs. The silver buckles of his heeled slippers were polished to a perfect shine.

Hell and damnation, he even wore a ridiculous confection of curls that called itself a wig!

His only comfort was that Jathan looked just as uncomfortable. His friend stood nearly half way across the field, dressed in the height of fashion and obviously wishing he were back on his ship sailing through a gale.

They had not been permitted to seek each other's company since the embarrassing incident in the gallery.

Albin tried to focus attention on what the simpering idiot in taffeta beside him was saying. She was commenting on the skill of several of the nobles playing at lawn bowls. He thought she'd held that subject for at least ten minutes.

Where did she come from? Orsal? Tralia? He couldn't guess.

"Don't you think, my lord?" The lady looked up at him expectantly. A black silk beauty patch hovered just above the center of her cheek to emphasize the dimple on her creamy skin.

Albin lifted two glasses of champagne from a passing tray and handed one to her. "Occasionally. But I doubt you do, my dear. Excuse me."

He thrust the champagne in to her hand and left, seeking some sanity amid the madness.

He barely managed five steps before he was surrounded by lovely princesses trailing their mothers and chaperones. A tall, slim lady veiled in the eastern fashion blocked his path completely. Beside her several young women in the loose caftans and long coats popular in Torenth ranged in age from perhaps sixteen to roughly twelve.

Dear Christ! They were throwing children at him.

He recognized the Bregmani princesses he had seen in the courtyard the day before. Today they were bathed and dressed in exquisite chambrae bodices and skirts slashed to reveal the embroidered silk beneath. Stiff petticoats and hoops held the skirts out to a fashionable width. Their wide brimmed bonnets were trimmed with silk roses and trailing ribbons.

Both of the sisters were exquisite. Albin realized he might be better off with two ladies for companions than one. After all, they could keep each other entertained.

He extended his hand and gave them the best smile he could. "I do not believe we have been introduced."

Both sisters giggled. This was not a good sign.

The taller of the sisters dipped a graceful curtsy. "Your Highness, I believe we met yesterday in the courtyard. We had just arrived and you were mending a horseshoe for our sister."

"What? . . . Oh, the little nun." He felt his cheeks redden as the image of a pert nose, a light dusting of freckles and the greenest eyes he'd ever seen flashed into his mind.

The shorter sister giggled again. "Yes, Your Grace. Our sister, the sister. That was Jessamyn, or will be until she takes her vows."

"And I am Margareth." The taller of the pair gave her sister's hand a quick squeeze. "This is Elspeth. Both of Bregmane, naturally."

Safety at last. Albion bowed to both princesses and offered his arms. "Would you ladies care to accompany me to the archery butts? I feel the need to do a bit of shooting and would welcome your company."

His decision proved to be the right one. Both sisters were intelligent and not given to idle chatter. They had a pleasant walk across the meadow to where several targets stood near the far edge.

Only one bow and quiver remained on the table when they arrived. Several lords and ladies, including Albin's younger brother Alroy, were trying their luck and skill under the direction of the Duke of Corwyn. Servants stood by ready to retrieve the arrows once the shooting paused.

Margareth shook her head when Albin offered her the bow. "I prefer to watch, Your Grace. And Elspeth does not shoot at all. We will stand under the pavilion and observe."

Albin shrugged, removed his jacket and slipped on the vambrace provided to protect his arm from the bowstring. A place opened in the line next to a lady with a trailing length of white silk dangling beneath her bonnet. Beyond the veil and a simple band of indigo ribbon the sunhat was untrimmed.

As he stepped to the line beside the lady he brushed the skirt of her gown. She turned, and he found himself looking down into the selfsame pair of green eyes he had been thinking of minutes earlier.

Jessamyn bowed immediately. "Your pardon, Your Grace."

"It is I who must ask pardon, my lady. I was clumsy. Forgive me."

She nodded. When it became apparent she would not speak further he turned to the target and fitted an arrow. His first shot struck squarely in the blue ring, well from the center.

His second and third attempts were no better. Unfortunately his mind kept drifting to the lady beside him. Her slender hands held the bow with consummate skill. Clearly she had not given her life only to prayer and penance for the sins of the world.

Determined to show better skill on the next shot, Albin followed the arrow's course with his mind. It was easy enough to correct the flight once the shaft was loosed.

He grinned as the shot struck the gold. Two more followed the apparent success of the first.

The Duke of Corwyn called the line closed. As the servants ran to retrieve their arrows Albin turned to find Jessamyn glancing at him from beneath the brim of her hat.

"Do you enjoy the sport, my lady?"

"I do, greatly. I have little chance to indulge in this normally, but I seize the opportunity when I can." She looked toward the pavilion, then gave him a soft smile. "So how do you find my sisters' company?"

"They are charming young ladies."

"And not skilled enough to realize that you are cheating, Your Grace."

Her words sent a thrill through his nerves. A combination of shock at being discovered, fear that she might expose him to his father, and delight that she might just, by some miracle, not be revolted by what he had done.

He forced a brave grin to his lips. "You have found me out, sweet lady. But do not think it cheating, I pray. I never yet wagered on this contest and no prize is offered, so I cannot cheat."

"But you thought to impress my sisters with your skill. Skill you do not possess, I think." The green eyes sparkled. "That is cheating, Your Grace."

"I am undone!" Albin spread his arms wide and gave her the most ridiculous, exaggerated bow he could manage. Then, on a whim, he sent her a quick thought. *It was not your sisters I sought to impress.*

Her eyes flicked to his. She understood him.

"Then who?"

He decided to leave that question hang. "Why are you not in habit today, Sister?"

Her cheeks colored perfectly. "I fear, Your Grace, I have none but the one I wore yesterday. As we sailed for Gwynedd we passed through a storm. The ship carrying our baggage sank, I fear, leaving us with no more than what we wore when we arrived."

"Then these are borrowed?" His grin widened. "I must thank the lender most richly."

"Then thank your late mother, Your Grace. These were her gowns, refitted by a veritable army of seamstresses."

The realization of how precarious their crossing had been struck Albin at her serious expression. "You are fortunate indeed 'twas the other ship that sank and not the one you were in. I shall have to light a candle in thanks for God's protection on your journey."

Jessamyn shook her head firmly. "Give no thanks for it, Your Grace. Many sailors lost their lives when that other ship went down. Their lives are worth no less than ours, for they had families who will now be missing their pay."

"You are right, of course. Still I shall be thankful that one ship went down rather than two. The storms can be most fierce." Albin searched for a way to change the subject. "I am guessing you have some training. Where did you study?"

Jessamyn gave him a soft, musical laugh. "For some years at St. Camber's, not far from your home. It was there I found my vocation."

He raised an eyebrow. "I studied there myself until Father decided Grecotha might give a better education for the heir to his throne." *Actually,* he added in a mental whisper, *I think he took me out of St. Camber's to appease Parliament. There are some in the Commons who do not approve of our "differences" and made that very plain.*

We have heard of these Covenanters in Bremagne. A wave of confusion and distaste followed her thought. *How do they stand having a King above them who is openly Deryni?*

In truth, I believe they would prefer to put my dear brother on the throne in Father's place and eliminate me all together. My brother, you see, has shown no signs of the talent as yet.

"So you were denied training because of some small minded men in large wigs?"

The image of Parliament assembled, masses of false curls bobbing and wagging over somber robes and wagging chins brought a full-throated laugh from Albin. "For never having seen them, my lady, you capture them perfectly. But no, I was not denied training. Fortunately I have a good friend who was able to continue and has given his time to fill in the gaps in my skills."

A servant passed them with a tray of tall glasses and a pitcher of lemonade. Albin waved him over. He watched Jessamyn sip the cool, slightly sour drink through softly pursed lips. The sight set his blood pounding through his veins.

Damn it! He had to remember this woman was promised to the Church. "Which of the sisters at St. Camber's inspired your choice of life?" Surely this subject was safe.

Jessamyn smiled up at him. "None there now, actually. It was the school's foundress. Her sacrifice and dedication showed me how very much one person could accomplish."

"There has been talk of elevating her to sainthood." Albin finished his lemonade in a single swallow. It did little to cool his blood.

"And how does your family stand on this issue?"

"Highly divided. There is definite resistance to adding an openly Deryni saint, yet the honor of having an ancestress raised so far cannot be denied." He went to drink from his glass again, realized it was empty and felt his face color brightly.

Jessamyn laughed softly. "I think you are struggling for conversation, Your Grace. Perhaps we should shoot again."

"Have our shafts been retrieved?" He glanced down and found his quiver full. How had that happened so quickly?

"About three rounds past, Your Grace."

"Albin." He took the empty glass she held out to him. Their hands brushed. "My name is Albin. I would have you use it, my lady."

"Then you in turn must call me Jessamyn." Her smile rivaled the sun for brilliance.

Albin set their glasses on the empty table and returned to shoot two more rounds of surpassing failure. He did not care. His mind was entirely focused on the woman beside him.

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Not far from the archery range a group of men stood beneath a striped canopy, their heads together, their voices low. Only one of the cluster wore the brocades and jewel toned silks that predominated the gathering. The rest were clad in the somber tones favored by the political segment known as Covenanters for their disavowal of worldly luxury and sloth.

"Our forces are nearly assembled." A short, heavysset man with a bulbous nose clamped his fist in an unmistakable expression of triumph. "After three years of planning we will finally rid Gwynedd of its rotten heart."

"I can hardly wait." Alroy Haldane did not bother to suppress his smile. "At last I will be able to make a difference here. The rule of the Devil's spawn will be ended once and for all."

"And it is fortunate for all of us we have your eager cooperation." Alouiscious Hubert fairly shook with excitement. "You must realize, Your Grace, how important to the success of our operation your continued assistance is."

"We have learned the mistakes of our ancestors." Another of the somber gentlemen clasped Alroy's hand and kissed it. "You are truly God's anointed servant, Your Grace. With your aid we will win the day."

"It need not be a great battle. Nor even an open confrontation, for all I would love to see the evil Deryni grovel before us." Hubert shook his head in regret. "Better we simply find a quiet change of power."

"But you will be rid of my brother?"

"We will have to. "

Alroy's lips twitched as he fought a smile. "I realize that. It is most regrettable. Still, if it is God's will let it be so. And my father?"

"Hopefully he will see the wisdom of abdicating his throne. If he does not, he will have to be removed. In any case he will be imprisoned where he can never again aid Satan in his unholy work."

Alroy glanced around. "I should not be seen in this company. It might raise suspicion. I will contact you after the ball tomorrow night, when I know my family's schedule for the remainder of the week."

Alouscious Hubert smiled again, but his pleasure did not reach his eyes. "As has been said before, my lords, Your Grace, Deus Volt! We shall succeed."

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By the next evening, Albin felt much like a prisoner in his father's lowest dungeon. Guards followed him everywhere. Even his usual squire had been replaced. He had no privacy anywhere.

Even at the ball he was unable to speak with Jathan. The Duke of Corwyn seemed to be keeping his son under the same strict security as Albin suffered. In desperation the prince finally excused himself for the privy. He was not surprised when two of the guards followed him from the ballroom and waited outside the door.

Albin forced himself to ignore the fetid stench. He grasped one of the ornamented silver buttons on the outrageous jacket his father had demanded he wear until the pattern bit into his fingertips. Then he concentrated on Jathan.

Before too long an answer came back. *I'm here. Where are you?*

Don't ask, jack-a-napes. Let's just say I'm desperate to talk to someone.

Jathan immediately sobered. *You're still thinking about that nun you met the other day.*

Yes, I am. Albin let his wave of despair wash through the link. *When I spoke with her at the picnic she seemed attracted to me, too. But what should I say to her?*

Sounds to me like you knew exactly what to say.

And who am I to think I can take a woman who has vowed herself to a life of service?

Now that he was bringing out his fears, Albin found he could not stop himself. *It's like history repeating itself over again. Isn't something like this what happened to Kelson?*

But the lady refused to marry Kelson, remember? You don't have a cousin who wants your throne. Jathan gave him a mental nudge. *You're likely to wind up just like him if you're not careful, though. Childless. Except this time there's no mass of Haldanes to fill in the void. You'd best get at it.*

I'm trying to.

Not standing in the jakes you're not! Screw your courage up and talk to her, you idiot. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Aye. And tomorrow, when I have you at sword's point, I'll remember that you called me an idiot.

Jathan's laughter nearly drowned the guard's urgent pounding on the door. *The day you have me at sword's point, Your Grace, is the day I don petticoats and post myself on the Spirit's bowsprit! Good hunting.*

His courage bolstered by Jathan's mirth, Albin left the jakes and strode into the ballroom with new confidence. The room was decorated like the garden of Greek gods, with plaster pillars draped in garlands of grape leaves and clusters of roses. Bunches of grapes and platters of cheese joined a silver fountain spouting champagne at one end of the room. From the gallery the music of flutes and violins accompanied the dancing couples.

Albin reached into his pocket. His fingers closed around the horseshoe nail Jessamyn had dropped two days past. It seemed he still felt her presence in the iron.

And she was nowhere to be seen. After a quick survey of the hall, Albin reached out with his mind. Jessamyn was nowhere about.

Then fortune smiled upon him. He spied Elspeth standing near some chairs in one corner, looking nervous. Surely she would know where her sister was.

Elspeth extended her hand immediately when he approached. "I pray you, Your Grace, rescue me. Your brother has asked me to dance twice thus far and I spy him coming for me yet again. My toes will never survive."

The idea of this fragile creature in distress brought Albin a welcome smile. "Then you are rescued, dear lady. Though I warn you I may be no savior."

They moved into the line of dancers. After a few graceful turns Albin ventured the question he needed answered. "Have you any idea where your sister has gone to?"

Elsbeth tipped her head toward the champagne fountain. "Margareth was dancing for some time with the Earl of Killshane. I believe they went to find a drink."

He shook his head. The dance separated them then. When they rejoined each other he finished his thought. "Your other sister. Jessamyn."

"Oh ho! So that's the way of it?" Elspeth grinned broadly. "Our father will be most glad, truly. He greatly desires a union with Gwynedd."

"And well he may get it, if only I can find your sister and speak with her."

Elsbeth chewed her upper lip. Her expression reminded Albin of the look Jessamyn wore when she was at the butts and concentrating on her next shot.

"She does not dance, Your Grace. She was so certain of her vocation she never learned how. If there is a library or a garden available she might be there."

"My thanks." Albin waited until they were at the end of the line to excuse himself. Elspeth sent him off with a laugh and a promise that her feet were not nearly so sore from his dancing as from his brother's.

The guards followed Albin from the hall again. As soon as they turned a corner and were out of sight of the party he sent them both urgent orders to go find a keg of beer somewhere and drink themselves silly.

A quick check of the main library revealed it deserted. Albin knew there was another part, reached through a false privy set into the wall. He had never managed to find the way through the portal that seemed to be the only access to that mysterious room, so he was certain Jessamyn could not manage it.

The garden seemed equally deserted. Moonlight sparkled off the shimmering water in a decorative pool and dusted the few night blooming flowers with silver tracings. Only crickets broke the silence.

He spied her sitting alone on an ornamented iron bench. Her gown of silver threaded brocade satin unadorned by jewelry or ribbons made her appear as one of the ornamental marble statues that graced odd portions of the maze. Only a pair of ivory combs drew her curling hair back from her face.

She was concentrating so hard on a book she did not hear him approach. A globe of golden handfire illuminated her page and cast gentle glowing light on her exquisite features.

Looking for the best way to announce himself Albin plucked a blossom from a cluster of lilies. The flower was closed for the night, but a bit of handfire provided just enough light to force it open.

As quietly as he could, Albin approached her. He was nearly close enough to drop the lily on her page she glanced up. Her lips curved into a smile.

"So you sought me out, Your Grace? Or were you merely escaping the crowd as I did?"

"I . . . well, a bit of both, actually." Now that she was facing him squarely Albin felt his stomach fill with butterflies. He slipped his hand into his pocket and felt the hard contours of the horseshoe nail. "The ball seemed pointless after a bit. I fear I am not much at idle conversation."

"Nor am I, Your Grace." She lifted her book. "As you see, I find my company elsewhere."

"In the Protocols?"

"And other works. The library at St. Camber's is incredible. A true treasure." She laid the book aside and shifted her feet from the bench. "Forgive me, Your Grace. Will you sit?"

"You were to call me Albin. Remember?" He joined her on the bench.

Her gaze fell on the open lilly still in his hand. "Are you now taking up gardening? Or have you a lady in mind for that flower?"

"Actually, it was to be a gift for the woman I would make my wife. If she will have me."

He thought he detected a moment of hesitation, a slight catch in her even breathing. "And which royal house will you ally yourself with?"

To keep from losing his nerve Albin concentrated on the lilly. Its scent filled the night yet did not mask the delicate odor of woman he detected. "Bregmane, actually."

"I see." Jessamyn was silent for a long moment. "Which of my sisters will you have to wife?"

"Which would you see me marry?"

She ran graceful fingers through her hair. One of the ivory combs slipped free and fell to the grass. It seemed to shimmer in the wavering light of two globes of handfire.

"To be most honest with you, they both have the qualities of a fine queen. Margareth possesses a brilliant talent for diplomacy and can be most persuasive when she feels strongly about something. On the other hand, Elspeth's gentle spirit soothes many a strain."

"And clearly either would make a most productive mother for any children I might wish to sire." This time he knew he heard her breath catch. His courage blazed anew. "Unfortunately, I find I am attracted to neither of them."

"Then to who, Your Grace?"

He caught her hands in his. "Can you not guess, Jessamyn? It is you I would share my life with."

Silence stretched between them. She shook her head slowly, her lips pursed.

"Unless I have mistaken your attraction?" Albin knew he was making a fool of himself. "Is your vocation fixed, then? I had thought you a novice. Tell me true, have I a chance to win your heart?"

"It is not that, Your Grace. Albin," she quickly amended when he would correct her. "I have little training for courtly life. My entire education has designed me for a life of service. I . . . I don't even dance."

"And do you think a life as wife to Gwynedd's king is no life of service? Must you lock yourself away from the enjoyment of life in order to make a difference?" He caressed her hands as he held them. She did not pull away. "As for the dancing, I can teach you that this night if you like."

"You teach me to dance? In the hall, before all assembled?" Jessamyn laughed softly. "I think not, Albin. I have some pride, you know."

"I meant here, in the garden. There's light enough, space and music." He laid the lily on her lap. "In for a penny, in for a pound, my lady. Take the dancing lesson and the dancing master if you will."

Her smile as she nodded was as shy as he felt. Gracefully she rose with him. "So how do we start?"

"As my master began with me. Barefoot." Albin kicked his silver buckled slippers off. They flew errantly and landed in the ornamental pool.

Jessamyn giggled at the oath he let slip. "They did you no good, my lord. You are far too tall as it is." And truly, with him in stocking and herself still shod she barely came to his shoulder.

"Then off with yours as well, wench!" Albin caught her in his arms and lifted her off the ground. It was easy enough to untie her laces with his mind. Before the song ended Jessamyn's slippers joined his in the pool.

"Now we are nearly ready." He lowered her to stand before him, still wrapped in his arms. "As I said, my dancing master made me begin barefoot."

"And what comes next?"

"To begin the lesson properly, a kiss in the moonlight."

Jessamyn tried to pull away. "You cannot be serious!"

He tightened his hold. "You forget, my lady, I have taken these lessons. You have not. Will you not surrender your will to your instructor?"

And when he caught her lips with his own she did not resist him. She was as sweet, unpracticed and genuine as the lily that lay yet on the bench.

Much later, when the clock struck the change of the day, did the kings of Gwynedd and Bregmane announce the impending union of their children to the cheers of all the hall. If any present noticed that both the prospective bride and groom were in very dirty stockings they said nothing. Truly, the amount of champagne that flowed after the announcement blunted the memories of more than one lord and lady.

~ *Finis* ~