

The Queen, the Elf and the Slipper

Deryni Summer Challenge 2002

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Araxie sat sipping a glass of lemonade in the solar. It had been a brutally hot day and even the grape Kelson brought her earlier did not lift her spirits. She decided to take a walk in the garden. Perhaps the day would be cooling off a bit as the sun began to set.

The queen rose, setting aside the piece of stitching she held on her lap. It was too hot even to concentrate on that. With a sigh, she left the castle and stepped into the gardens. It was no cooler outside, even under the shade of the large, old trees. Araxie headed for a stone bench under one of the trees. She was barely seated when one of her ladies-in-waiting rushed up to her. The girl just stood there, eyes darting left and right, never quite resting on her queen. After a few moments of silence, the queen wrinkled her nose impatiently.

“Was there something you wanted?” Araxie asked.

“Oh, yes, Your Highness,” the lady stammered.

“Yes? Is something wrong?” Araxie said.

“Oh, I’m afraid, well, you see, it seems there is a problem with tomorrow night’s ball!” The girl finally managed to get her message out in a rush.

“The ball?” Araxie looked puzzled. “I thought everything was set. I went over the last minute details with the staff this morning.”

“Oh, yes, that is all set. But it seems that something has gone missing from your wardrobe!”

“My wardrobe? But I tried on the dress after lunch! It’s perfect!”

“I know, my lady. But we can’t find your left dancing slipper!”

“My left dancing slipper? But I must have that slipper! I can’t go to the ball without it!” The poor lady-in-waiting, afraid that her mistress was about to take out the loss of a slipper on her, simply bobbed a half-curtsy and hurried away. Araxie stood up quickly, stamping a foot in frustration.

“I know where your slipper is,” came a singsong voice behind the young queen. Araxie whirled around, but saw no one.

“Who’s there?” she demanded. “Come out and show yourself, or I shall call the guards.” Although out of sight for the moment, there were always a few of the Haldane Royal Guard nearby whenever a member of the royal family left the castle. They would be at the queen’s side instantly, swords ready, at a single call.

“They wouldn’t find me,” came the voice again. Araxie turned round and round, and looked behind the tree and even under the bench, but no one was there. She put her hands on her hips and gazed up into the leafy branches above her head.

“All right,” she laughed, tilting her head back and forth to spy out the person she knew had to be hidden up in the tree. “Enough games. Come down and let me see who you are.” A tinkle of silvery laughter showered down on her.

“Right in front of her nose and still she can’t see me!” The voice taunted Araxie. She was losing patience.

“I command you, as your Queen, to show yourself this instant!” Araxie did not like to use her position to demand obedience, and, as she was quite well liked by everyone, rarely needed to. At this particular instant, she was feeling a bit vexed and wanted whoever was teasing her on this exceptionally hot summer day to know it.

“You’re not my Quee-eeen!” A tiny movement on a forked branch at eye level caught Araxie’s eye and she saw a flash of bright red. She stepped closer to the tree and peered intently at the branch. Standing on the rough wood was a tiny person! No bigger than a robin or a blue jay, the figure stood with hands on hips, and head cocked to one side.

“Finally!” It was hard to tell if the little person speaking was male or female. It wore green hose, a green doublet belted in brown leather with a tiny gold buckle and soft green boots. Chin length red hair surrounded a bright, round face with clear blue eyes. Araxie stood staring for a long moment.

“What are you?” Araxie asked. The little person laughed again.

“I’m an elf, of course.”

“Well, Eirian should be here, then. Her father was just telling her a story about elves. Of course, in Nigel’s story, the elves were taller than humans.”

The elf looked up expectantly and asked: “Did someone mention Nigel Haldane?”

“Do you know Nigel?” Araxie asked.

“No, but I hear he is quite the Dashing Duke!” The elf smiled dreamily. Araxie shook her head.

“Now, what about my dancing slipper?” the queen asked. The elf shrugged.

“What about it?”

“You said you knew where it was,” Araxie reminded... Him? Her? She decided it must be female, given the reaction to the mention of Nigel’s name.

“Did I? Hmmmm. No, I don’t think I am going to tell you.”

“But you must!” Araxie cried. “This is the Midsummer’s Ball and it is special. We had to search for months to find material for those slippers that matched the silk of the dress.” She took a step closer to the tree. “My husband is the King, you know. You don’t want to make him angry.”

“He’s not my king,” the elf said. “Elves don’t answer to human kings- or queens.”

“Well, what do you answer to? How can I get you to give me back my slipper?”

The elf beckoned Araxie to come closer. When the queen stepped around the bench to the tree, the elf leaped onto her shoulder. Araxie jumped involuntarily at the unexpected move.

“Take me with you,” the elf said. “I promise, you will get your slipper back tomorrow.” Araxie pleaded, begged, argued and cajoled, to no avail. In the end, she simply let the elf ride her shoulder back to the castle.

She decided not to mention the elf to Kelson that evening. He and a group of nobles spent the day hunting, with no luck, and he was hot, sweaty and in a decidedly unpleasant temper when they returned. Araxie thought it best not to bring up elves and stolen slippers on this particular evening.

The morning of the ball was clear and bright, and dawned with the heat wave broken at last. Kelson left immediately after breakfast for a last minute fitting of his outfit for the ball, and a Council meeting afterward. He would

be busy right up until the ball began. Araxie dawdled over the remains of their early meal, not really eating, but not wanting to get up right away, either.

“Going to miss all the fun!” The elf’s voice startled her, and she realized she had been daydreaming a bit.

“What fun?” Araxie asked. “The ball doesn’t start until this evening.”

The elf shook her head, and climbed from the table where she had been standing onto the arm of Araxie’s chair.

“Not that fun. You should go to the audience chamber.”

“But neither Kelson nor I have audiences today, because of the ball.” Araxie looked puzzled.

“You’d be surprised,” was all the elf would say.

Partly out of curiosity and partly because she didn’t really have anything else to do, Araxie made her way to the audience chamber. On her way, she picked up a hat from a bench in the hall. To her surprise, there were about a dozen people inside. There was an excited murmuring as she entered.

“The Queen!”

“She is here!”

“I told you!”

Bows and curtsies preceded Araxie’s progress to the front of the chamber, where she made her way a bit to the left of the dais where the audience thrones sat. She walked up to Bishop Arilan, who stood to the side with another priest.

“What is going on?” Araxie asked him. “Why are all these people here? There were not supposed to be any audiences today.”

Arilan shrugged.

“I have no idea, Your Highness. I was walking past, saw the open door and heard voices, so I came in. Everyone was saying that you were coming. I suspect, however, that since you are here, you are going to have to speak to them.”

Araxie sighed. She made her way back to the dais and sat in the one of the thrones. The elf slipped out from where she had hidden underneath the Queen’s long, golden hair.

The first of those waiting in the chamber approached the Queen. He was slightly built, with a sharp face and intense, dark eyes. Dressed in black leather boots and breeches, a deep wine coloured shirt with laces open at the throat covered with a dark cape, and wearing a wide brimmed hat sporting a large feather, he looked a bit comical. He swept the hat off in a large, sweeping bow. Araxie tried her best to hide a smile of amusement.

“Your Majesty,” he said, straightening and laying the hat at his feet. “Allow me to introduce m’self.” His accent marked him as from a working class, probably in the market district of Rhemuth itself. “I’m called Richard the Bloody, and I ‘ave a gift for you.” He reached inside his cape, causing the two Haldane lancers at the sides of the dais to cross their lances in front of the Queen and even Arilan took a step toward the man. With a flourish, he pulled a parchment roll from underneath. Araxie waved the guards off.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I don’t think he can do much harm with a parchment.” Richard smiled and began to read.

*A Queen so fair
Sits on her chair
She seeks a gift
For she's all adrift*

*A slipper lost
And what the cost
If at the dance
She cannot prance*

*But soon we'll see
As it will be
The lost is gained
Before it rained*

He finished reading and rerolled the parchment.

“Well, that was bloody awful!” Arilan said. Richard grimaced.

“Everybody’s a critic!” The poet tied the parchment with a golden ribbon and handed it to the Queen. “I mean, I know the rain part is a bit off, but I’d like to see you try to write a decent poem!” He picked up his hat and stalked out of the hall. Araxie sighed. This was going to be a long morning.

A pretty young girl rushed up to the dais. She made an awkward curtsy to the queen.

“Oh, Your Highness,” she exclaimed. “Do you wish to keep the poem? I know most people think he is a terrible poet, but I think he is wonderful! If you don’t want it, may I have it? I will give you something else.” She held out a folded piece of cloth. Araxie thought for a moment, and then beckoned the girl to the throne.

“All right,” she said. “I have to admit, I’m not nearly as taken with this Richard the Bloody as you. You may have the poem.” The girl took the parchment, dropped her gift in Araxie’s lap and rushed out of the room. Araxie picked up the cloth and held it up. It was a man’s under tunic, of fine linen, embroidered with a Torenthi crest. Araxie sighed. Whatever would she do with *this*?

“Ah, ha!” A voice called out from the back of the hall. “I knew it would turn up sooner or later!”

The owner of the voice began making his way through the crowd. He was a Torenthi ambassador who Araxie remembered Kelson introducing to her.

“That is King Liam-Lajos’ favorite underwear!” The ambassador said. “I was sent to find it and return it to him.”

“Why didn’t you just ask about it?” Araxie questioned. The man gave her an odd look.

“Where’s the fun in that?” he asked. “May I have His Majesty’s underwear, now, please? I will give you this in return.” He held out a perfect white lily. Araxie nodded, gave him the tunic and took the lily. The ambassador left the hall. There were only a few people left in the room now. They began to press closer to the dais.

“The Queen is trading gifts!”

“Oh, I have something!”

“May I have that one?”

In rapid succession, Araxie accepted- and gave away- an ivory comb, a horseshoe and a hammer. Finally, there was no one left in the room except one lone monk, robed and hooded in a dark brown habit. Araxie glanced over to where Arilan stood. Duncan had joined him at some point, although Araxie had not noticed him come in. Both bishops shook their heads, indicating that they did not recognize the hooded monk.

“I am sorry, Father,” Araxie said. “But it seems I have nothing left to trade.” The monk lifted his head and smiled at the young queen.

“Oh, that’s just fine, Your Highness,” he said. “I am not here to get, but only to give. I believe this is yours.” He pulled an object from under his robe. Araxie’s face lit up and she smiled broadly.

“My left dancing slipper!” The queen cried excitedly. “But wherever did you get it?”

“Oh, I have many friends and travel to many places. I find things,” he said enigmatically. The elf on Araxie’s shoulder giggled, making the queen start a bit. She had forgotten the little being in the rush of the morning’s strange events.

“Still, I wish I could give you something. I was afraid I would never see this”

“My hat!” The monk interrupted. “You’ve found my sunhat!” He reached over to pick up the hat Araxie had found in the hall. “This is all I could ask in return, Your Majesty. I travel much and need it to keep the sun out of my eyes as I write of my journeys.” He pulled the hood of his cloak back and set the hat firmly on his tonsured head.

“Brother Theo!” Duncan exclaimed, now recognizing the man in front of the throne. “You old rascal!”

“Ah, well, if it isn’t Duncan McLain! It’s been a long time, my friend.” Brother Theo turned to grasp the hand Duncan offered. “We must sit and talk for a while before I leave.” Araxie felt the elf on her shoulder shift positions. She glanced down. The elf looked up expectantly.

“Did someone mention Duncan McLain?”

The End