

A Michaelmas Mystery
A Deryni Summer 2002 Challenge Tale
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Is that accursed blacksmith going to be hammering all night? Ibrahim ibn Majid wondered. He looked down from the stable loft, and saw the blacksmith was now at work on a glossy black palfrey, replacing the light bay gelding he'd been shoeing moments before. For Ibrahim's purposes, the blacksmith's forge could not be more inconveniently located. There was simply no way he could get down the hayloft ladder and away across the yard unseen, for all his training at stealth and secrecy.

Ibrahim inched backward, then soundlessly returned to the dark corner of the loft where he'd hidden all afternoon.

I must get away from here!, he thought, struggling to master his impatience and his fear. *Now that I have what I came for and they will be waiting for me.*

With the most difficult part of his task done, He should be down at the cathedral already to use the transfer portal there. However, he knew it was almost the hour of Vespers now and the cathedral would be full for at least another hour, especially with the Archbishop himself performing the Office tonight. Of course, it was easy to be anonymous in a crowd, but he'd have no chance to get into the sacristy unseen until long after the service was over.

It is nearly the hour of prayer for me too, Ibrahim thought. *I have lived among Christians for far too long.*

He glanced around and saw a tiny window far down at the opposite end of the stable loft, glowing red with the light of the sunset. He turned his back to it, spread his cloak before him and knelt to face the East. In his mind he heard the muezzin calling the Faithful to prayer and repeated the well-known prayers in his own mind. His religious duty completed, he returned to his dark corner, listening to the steady clink-clink of the blacksmith's hammer as he shaped a new horseshoe. Despite his longing to be away from Rhemuth before dawn, he could not afford to jeopardize his mission through haste or carelessness now. Since he had no choice, there were advantages to leaving the castle at night, anyway. . In the dark, one armored man in mail and a surcoat looked and sounded very like another, and there were plenty of foreigners in Rhemuth, these days. But his orders had been very precise. He was to pass as near unseen and inconspicuous as a man could. It was vital that he should be unmemorable, leaving no lasting impression in anyone's mind. He could use magic if necessary to make sure he was forgotten, but it was far better that he should see and be seen by as few people as possible. Better that he should take a little extra time and return a day later than planned than that he should make himself at all conspicuous.

He had lived with the Anvillers for nearly two years now, outwardly partaking of the Christian Rites of the Order. He flattered himself that he had dissembled rather well. It was also useful to have a working knowledge of the outer forms of Christian worship in order to be able to blend in with a crowd here in the Christian West. Tonight was the vigil of Michaelmas. If he couldn't leave safely tonight, all was not yet lost. His opportunity for escape would surely come tomorrow, with all the great bustle of coming and going on a major feast day on the Christian calendar. Ibrahim had managed to pinch a scarlet surcoat to make him look like one of the Rhemuth household guards.

Kelson of Gwynedd and that bleached bride of his would no doubt be attending Mass at the Cathedral at noon tomorrow, causing a great deal of turmoil in the stables as the horses for their party and for all the nobility of Gwynedd were made ready for the ride down to the cathedral. Easiest thing in the world to lose himself in that crowd and escape this benighted city.

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Ibrahim couldn't say exactly what woke him. He was just awake between one heartbeat and his next and that it was almost pitch dark in the loft, and hours later than he'd planned. The stable was quiet below, except for an occasional rustle of straw or stomp of a shod hoof.

Allah strike me dead! I had no business going to sleep!

Ibrahim crawled over near the ladder to investigate the possibility of climbing down unseen. He sensed Complime was now long past, let alone Vespers. There was the danger of being stopped by the Watch in the city streets for being abroad this late. Ibrahim wasn't terribly worried about that, however. Once past the castle gates, he was confident that he could make it down to the cathedral unseen; he'd been told he moved with the silence of a hunting cat. The hard part was the castle gate, however. Almost no one would be coming in or out, and anyone who tried at *this* time of night was sure to be stopped and asked to identify themselves and their business--two things that Ibrahim would rather not do. Half way to the ladder, Ibrahim froze. Once again, he very nearly swore, only just remembering he must not speak aloud. There were voices below, very near the foot of the ladder; a girl's giggles and a man's deeper laughter.

Not quite as soundlessly, Ibrahim backed up swiftly on his hands and knees, and burrowed under some hay to hide himself.

The woman came up first, and to Ibrahim's relief, she hurried off to her right down the length of the stable. She was still laughing about something. Ibrahim caught a glimpse of her back as she passed, and saw that she swung her wide hips boldly as she walked. She carried a pair of stout leather shoes, but the hem of her plain beige kirtle was innocent of any decoration. The gown looked new and relatively clean, but the cut was too ordinary and the fabric too plain to clothe a noblewoman. She had to be one of the numerous female servants employed in Rhemuth Castle. Her head was uncovered and long brown curls hung down her back.

The man had come up now though and was standing still at the head of the ladder for a moment, sensibly letting his eyes adjust to the dimness. He carried a bundle of something wrapped in a napkin.

"Where ARE you?" he called in a teasing voice. "Where's that pretty lass Meg that I was talkin' to just now?" His voice had a definite highland burr to it.

"Come FIND me!" Meg caroled a few yards away, now. "Great kingy of Gwyneddy!"

"I'm *not* the kingy of Gwyneddy, I'm the dukey of Cassany," the young man warbled back.

Something in his voice suggested to Ibrahim that the duke might have rolled his eyes, just then. Ibrahim certainly did.

"If ye say 'kingy of Gwyneddy' in the *real* kingy's hearing, His Majesty would boot ye so hard, ye'd wake up in the Connait the next morning!" the duke said as he began walking in the girl's direction. He stumbled on the uneven plank flooring and cursed the darkness. A pause and then suddenly the loft was altogether *too* well lit with silvery handfire for Ibrahim's liking. He froze in his corner and it took all his self-control to remain silent. Carefully, he raised his shields and kept his mind as quiescent as possible. He wished he dared burrow deeper into the concealment of the hay, but feared any noise would alert the other two to his presence. The young man certainly matched the basic description of the Duke of Cassan he'd had from his master. He definitely didn't want to form a lasting impression on Dhugal McLain who was perhaps Kelson of Gwynedd's closest boon companion. Fortunately, the duke appeared far more interested in the girl than in really *looking* around the stable loft.

By the light of the handfire, Ibrahim studied the girl, too. If he was to be a captive audience at this tryst, he might as well enjoy it. She had a round, pretty, highly colored face, and big brown eyes to go with the lush brown hair. She was still young and lithe, but was full and curvy at breast, hip and bottom, Ibrahim couldn't help but notice. And she had partly unlaced the front of her gown, showing more of those breasts than a prostitute of Khokanistan would do until some money had changed hands. She was smiling up at the duke, but her eyes were just a little anxious as she eyed his handfire.

"Ach, it's just light, lass, it will nae hurt you," the Duke said. "There's nothin' evil in it, an' it 's safer up here than a lantern with all this hay about." He compressed the ball with his hand and the light became dimmer to Ibrahim's relief and evidently to Meg's. He could still see them easily though and saw that the Duke had set down his napkin-wrapped bundle, and was now kissing Meg on the lips, his nearer hand clasping her rib cage just below her right breast.

"What did you bring me, Dukey? A present?" Meg cooed. She sounded very like the doves that ambled or flew all around these stables during the day, Ibrahim thought. A dove with a bad case of avarice.

"Well, in a way," McLain chuckled. "More of a midnight snack than a present."

"Oh, you *are* sweet, m'lord," Meg giggled. If she was disappointed, she was at least attempting to conceal it. "I'm that hungry, but servants aren't allowed to eat between meals."

Ibrahim could see the duke untying the corners of the cloth napkin.

"Grapes!" Meg squealed when he produced a large bunch of pale green fruits. "Oh, how did you know? They're my favorites!"

"Ach, lass, *last* week you said you liked strawberries best," McLain teased.

"Well yes, but that was last week," Meg pointed out. "*This* week grapes are my favorites."

"I do like a lass with an open mind. Open up, now." He popped a grape into Meg's open mouth. She closed her eyes and gave a little moan of pleasure.

"Mmmmmm, they're so sweeeet," she sighed happily. "I don't usually get anything this nice to eat."

"Ah, go on with ye, lass," Duke Dhugal chuckled, feeding her another grape. "If one must be a servant, the royal household is the place to be. There are plenty of lasses who would trade places with you for the chance to eat meat every day and sleep in a warm bed every night!"

Meg pouted, more to be alluring than out of any real displeasure, Ibrahim guessed. "*You* should try being a servant if you think it's so wonderful, m'lord," she complained then spoiled the look with a smile. "It's hard work all day long, and everyone orders you about. And the chamberlain is ever so strict. So's Her Majesty."

"Queen Araxie is strict? She's barely had time to settle in yet, lass."

"No, Queen Jehana. We're hardly allowed even to *talk* to men."

"Weel, you're talking to a man now, aren't you darlin'?" McLain plucked another grape off the stem and tucked it between Meg's breasts.

"You *are* a silly dukey!" she squealed laughing. "How am I supposed to eat a grape down *there*?"

"Here's one for you, lass. The one down there's for *me*." He poked another grape into Meg's mouth and then buried his face between her breasts. In pursuit of the fruit, perhaps.

Or perhaps not, Ibrahim thought. His respect for the duke's flirting technique rose a few notches.

"Her Majesty wouldn't like it at *all* if she knew where I was right now," Meg said breathily. Her hands had come up to caress the duke's hair.

"I willnae tell her if *you* won't, Meg, my lass," McLain chuckled. "An' my father would frown and mutter if he knew where *I* was."

Ibrahim could see him swallow something, and then push another grape down between Meg's breasts—which were now even more exposed than before. He felt a reluctant stirring deep inside himself at the sight. It had been a *very* long time since he'd had a woman. Not for him, the austere, celibate life

of the Anviller knights. He was glad to think that his disappearance – now a fortnight in duration—would make it almost impossible to return to Djellarda without incurring suspicion.

“I wonder if Her Majesty was strict with the King too?” Meg asked. “He never even *looks* at us.” Her voice was wistful.

“Meg, lass, the King’s tucked up in bed with his own bonnie queen. You’ll not find *him* climbing hayloft ladders to meet serving girls in the dead of night, anyway. An’ particularly not now that he’s married.”

“Oh, *I* know,” Meg sighed. “But it’s a pity. He could have taken all of us up here if he’d wanted. We all think he’s the handsomest man ever. We cried all night when he got married this summer.”

“What, *all* of you lasses at once?” McLain asked lightly. “He’d have panicked!”

“No, silly!” Meg laughed. “One at a time, of course. But any of us would have gone anywhere to please him if he’d so much as crooked a finger at us.”

“Meg, he’s had princesses by the dozens paraded in front of him. If they couldn’t interest him, how could servant girls?”

“I wish *I* were a princess,” Meg sighed. “I helped Kayla tidy Her Majesty’s chambers this morning, since Anne had a toothache. And oh, she has nice things. I saw an ivory comb on her dressing table. It had little jewels set in gold all along the top, too!”

“Yes I know, I was with the King when he chose it for her,” McLain sighed patiently. “Meg—”

“I wish *I* were a queen, too,” Meg sighed. “All she has to do is sit about wearing beautiful clothes and be admired all day, and people bring her everything she needs. Do you know, I don’t think she’s ever had to pick up so much as a pin in her life!”

“She may not sweep floors or make beds or pick things up off the floor, but Her Majesty still has to work hard,” the Duke replied. “Being a Queen is very difficult.”

“Go on with you! She never does a stroke of work that *I* can see. Not *real* work, anyway. And every night she gets to sleep with the King. Do you think His Majesty likes her?”

“He’s in love with her, Meg! Of course he likes sleeping with her.”

“I meant, did you know he liked blonde ladies, most?”

“I—ah, he’s—”

“They sleep together all the time because everyone wants the new Queen to have a baby, soon,” Meg said importantly. “I heard Queen Jehana say so to the Duchess Meraude. But later on, he *might* like to try different girls.”

“Ah lass, if you’ve got your cap set for the King, I’d not count on it,” McLain sighed. “He doesn’t just sleep with his wife because he’s hoping for a baby.”

“What’s *wrong* with me?” Meg pouted.

“Nothin’ at all darlin’,” McLain cooed. “You’re up in a hayloft with a duke who likes you quite a lot. That’s none so bad, is it?” He gave her another kiss, more sensual than the first. But Meg turned her face away from him afterwards, her expression sullen.

“Prince Conall liked me, so why *wouldn’t* the king ever sleep with me?”

“Prince Conall liked any girl under thirty and wearing a skirt, just about,” McLain grumbled. “He got that from old King Donal. His Majesty is a lot more cautious, that’s all. And if he notices you at all, it’s only as a maidservant and because he wants you to fetch something or else take it away.”

“He doesn’t like commoners, you mean?”

“Well, perhaps I do at that.”

Ibrahim could tell the Duke was holding on hard to his patience.

"Meg, you're a maidservant. The King's a fair bit above your likes and dislikes."

"I attracted a *duke*, didn't I?"

"Aye, ye did. But to tell ye the truth, lass, at heart, I'm more a border lord than I am a duke. I'm still not used to it, and all this grandeur makes me nervous."

"So you're saying if you were a real *duke*-duke, like the Duke of Corwyn, I wouldn't interest you?" Meg turned away from McLain abruptly and began to re-lace the opening of her gown.

Ibrahim winced at the heat in Meg's voice even as he enjoyed McLain's discomfiture.

"I *am* a real duke, sweetheart," McLain wheedled. "Now come, along and have some more grapes. If the King's not interested, it's just because of the way *he* is. It doesnae mean there's anything wrong with *you*."

"Really?" Meg tilted her head slightly back in the duke's direction.

"In fact, almost everything is *right* with you, Meglet," McLain crooned. "You're pretty enough to be a noblewoman and prettier than some of the grand, titled ladies I've seen." He crept his right hand around and caressed Meg's breast again. She allowed this to happen, although she did not smile at him.

"Then would you marry me? Make me your duchess?"

"Would I *what*?!"

"Marry me!"

McLain's face was a comical study of amusement, embarrassment and astonishment. Ibrahim thought that if a live fish had leaped through the man's open mouth and slid down his throat, he could not look more comically surprised.

"Meg, now be realistic! The King would never let me marry you."

Even if he wanted to marry her, Ibrahim thought with grim amusement. A man with less care for the feelings of others could make the magnitude of Meg's presumption painfully clear to her. He rather liked the Duke for considering the feelings of a common servant girl. Of course, he might still want to bed her, and for that, she'd need to be willing.

"Why *not*?" Meg whined.

"I'm expected to marry a lady who's got a good dowry and hopefully a title of her own, Meg. That's the way marriage *is* for people like me. Yer father is a gardener, an' yer mother works in the castle laundry. I don't doubt they're good, honest people, but ye've no dowry, no title and no lands. An' ye wouldn't know how to run a household consisting of hundreds of people, would ye?"

"I could learn!"

"Maybe ye could. But I'm afraid it's impossible, darlin'. I'm sorry."

"I might have had the King, but I was willing to settle for you," Meg muttered.

"That's very generous," McLain drawled. "I'm sure I'm sensible of the honor."

"But not anymore!" Meg fished the grape out of her bosom and threw it back at the duke, hitting him in the nose, making him yelp.

"Oh now Meglet, don't go running off in a pet! The truth is hard sometimes, but it *is* the truth! The King doesnae want ye, he wants the wife he has. An' it's not just a question of dynastic convenience between them. As for me, it's just not *done* for a duke to marry a servant girl!"

"No, but you're willing to use me," Meg flung back over her shoulder as she climbed to her feet. "But *I* only sleep with Kings and Princes, *not* with silly dukes!" She scooped up her shoes and came

stomping back toward the ladder. She was too indignant to notice Ibrahim, fortunately, even when their faces were nearly on the level just before she disappeared down the ladder.

When she was gone, McLain suddenly let out an inarticulate bellow of frustration with all a thwarted young man's passion in it

"This isn't *fair*, Lord!" he shouted, shaking his left fist up at the stable roof. "I don't ask You for much! But now that he's married, once, just *once* can't I meet a girl who doesn't want to talk about *him* all the time? And one who might even think that the acquaintance of a friendly duke is worth cultivating!?"

Ibrahim felt a stir of both disappointment and sympathy for McLain himself. If he must wait for satisfaction until he returned home safely, watching was the next best thing, and he'd rather been enjoying this.

"It's my father isn't it?" McLain muttered as he too stood and began brushing hay and dust from his clothing. "Been wearing out his knees hasn't he, with all his praying that You'll keep me as the last virgin knight in Gwynedd? Sometimes being a bishop's son can be a right nuisance!"

He positively stamped toward the ladder and slid more than climbed down the first few rungs. Then he froze as his eyes and Ibrahim's met.

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"I still don't know how you managed to persuade my unruly children to sit still long enough to have their portraits painted, my Prince." Alaric Morgan looked up from his rapt examination of the pair of richly framed miniature portraits of Briony and Kelric, and smiled across the table at his King.

"Blatant bribery finally carried the day," Kelson answered cheerfully. "Where do you think Kelric's new fleet of toy boats came from? And Briony's doll family expanded somewhat, as well. Copious amounts of gingerbread were consumed by them both, I must further admit. And the painter got double his normal fee."

Morgan laughed and looked back at his birthday gift. "With everything you had to think about this summer, I'm amazed you thought of this as well."

"Richenda was a most helpful co-conspirator," Kelson replied. "In fact, she did most of the bullying, persuading and bribing. My part was to keep *you* out of the way."

"I have all of you to thank, then," Morgan said. "I'm very glad to have these portraits of them as they are now. I'm prepared to swear that both my children changed hugely in just the two weeks we spent in Beldour."

"Pardon me, Sire, but the Lord Azim is here," Ivo Hepburn said, approaching the table and bowing to his lord.

"He apologizes for his intrusion, but insists that he must speak with you on a very important matter."

"If Azim says it's important then I'm sure it must be," Kelson said easily. "Show him in, Ivo."

Ivo went and opened the door to admit the Anviller Knight. "Prince Azim, Sire, Your Grace."

"I thank you for seeing me before the feast, my Prince," Azim. He made his customary graceful low bow, his right hand brushing his heart, lips and forehead to both King and Duke. "I apologize for my lack of notice, but it truly is a matter of grave importance, and one that is best not discussed in the public atmosphere of a feast. Liam-Lajos may be in danger."

"You're always welcome in Rhemuth, my Lord Azim," Kelson replied. "What is the nature of this danger?"

"I have reason to believe we Anvillers have been playing host to a spy," Azim answered grimly. "One in the former employment of Mahael, and now of Teymuraz alone.

"He has been an initiate and a novice of my Order these past two years," Azim continued. "A very promising young Adept in the arcane sense, and also at his weapons training. His name is Ibrahim ibn Majid, and he claimed to have been a recent convert to Christianity." Azim looked grim. "Recent, but never very enthusiastic, and as I think back on it, I *should* have suspected him all along.

"But the heart of the matter is that he disappeared from Djellarda a fortnight ago. I now have reason to suspect that he may be in Rhemuth, and he must be considered dangerous."

Kelson frowned.

"This man is in Rhemuth, but *Liam* is in danger?" Morgan blurted. "I would think Kelson would be the one in danger. Teymuraz wouldn't mind seeing him dead, either."

"King Liam," Azim repeated. "Although I suspect you're right that the King must be vigilant tonight, Alaric. Beldour and Torenthaly were both scoured for any sign of Ibrahim, but turned up nothing. Even if Teymuraz can't use them himself, he could have given the portal locations and signatures to Ibrahim. Even when we studied the likeliest portals in Beldour, we couldn't detect any sign that Ibrahim had used them."

Azim paused and stared at the floor for a moment, then looked up at the other two. "I came through the portal at St George's Cathedral tonight," he told them quietly. "I probed it thoroughly after I'd come through, and I can tell you that Ibrahim arrived in Rhemuth by the same means. But he's only used that portal once. I therefore conclude that he must still be somewhere in Rhemuth, unless he departed through another portal or left the city by more conventional means. That last is not likely, as his home is clear down in Um Al-Zakar beyond the Jebel-Khaibar range. It would take him weeks, possibly months to get home without the help of a portal."

"Wonderful, then we quite probably have a Muslim assassin hiding somewhere in Rhemuth," Kelson sighed.

"And a very skillful Deryni one my Prince, in the employ of a man who wouldn't mind seeing you dead, as Alaric pointed out," Azim added. "That is why I came in person tonight."

"While *your* welcome is never in doubt, I can't say your news is particularly welcome this time, Azim." Kelson gave him a grim smile. "Nonetheless, the warning is much appreciated."

"It is to the benefit of all that Ibrahim should be stopped, Sire," Azim answered. "Yours, Liam's and that of my Order. Quite aside from my personal feelings about the waste of both your and Liam-Lajos's lives and your combined potential to do good for your people, there is also the stability of both Gwynedd and Torenth to consider.

"And there is knowledge unique to the Anvillers that we do not care to have go beyond the walls of Djellarda, as it would be valuable to our enemies. If possible, I should prefer to take him back with me alive, but if he cannot be captured, then he must be killed."

Kelson nodded. "So be it. Can you describe this man—"

"Swift, no! Drop it, you bad dog! Oh you little fiend, come back here!"

Araxie's voice floated out to all of them from her chamber. The curtains rustled in the doorway as a fuzzy brindled greyhound puppy came bounding into the room with something red in his mouth. His tail wagged provocatively as he went down in a play bow before them, just begging to be chased around the room.

He was followed closely by his Royal mistress, dressed for the Michaelmas feast although missing her coronet and veil yet.

"Help me catch him, Kelson!" Araxie pleaded. "The little wretch has one of my new dancing slippers!" She displayed the pointed toes of her left foot, as yet covered only with white silken hose.

Swift thought it was a splendid game, and managed to elude his four pursuers for some minutes, until he was efficiently cornered by Azim and Kelson and relieved of the by now gnawed and soggy slipper. The toes were particularly damaged, and one of the puppy's fangs had put a hole right through the soft thin leather.

"I'm sorry darling," Kelson said. "We didn't get it away from him quickly enough. Have you another pair to wear tonight?"

"Oh, of course," Araxie said as she looked at the ruined slipper with disfavor. "Scores of pairs. But these were specially dyed to match my gown." She waved a hand at her silken skirts that were the rich, lovely red of pomegranate seeds. She shook the slipper at Swift. "Bad dog, Swift!"

The puppy crouched down and whimpered, rolling his eyes appealingly at Araxie, his tail thumping on the floor.

Azim chuckled softly. "He knows how to appeal to a judge I think, even when the evidence of his guilt is in her hand!"

Araxie turned and smiled at her teacher. "Lord Azim! I did not expect to see you this evening. What brings you to Rhemuth?"

Azim bowed low before her and returned her smile. "I wish I could say it was to celebrate Michaelmas with the new Queen of Gwynedd, but I'm afraid a more serious matter has brought me here."

Araxie raised her eyebrows in question and was quickly told of the matter at hand.

"Bishop McLain, Sire," Ivo said, standing aside quickly to allow Duncan to enter the room.

Duncan hurried in, giving his king and queen a distracted bow, nodding greeting to Azim and Morgan. He glanced hastily around the room as if looking for one more person, then his expression took on a look of definite worry.

"Duncan, I was wondering when you'd show up," Kelson said cheerfully. "What's the matter?"

"Good evening My Prince, My Lady," Duncan said, turning to face Kelson. "I have to say I'm disappointed not to find Dhugal here. He's not in his quarters, and I've not seen him all day except at Mass in the cathedral this afternoon. He promised he would come and see me after Mass, but he never came. Have any of you seen him?"

"He dined with Araxie and me last night, and I'm sure I saw him during the procession to the Cathedral and back," Kelson said slowly. "But I haven't really had a conversation with him today.

"I asked him something as we were all leaving the Cathedral," Araxie added. "He just muttered some excuse and hurried away from me. It was certainly not like him to do that, but I didn't think anything more of it until now."

"I think I saw him having some ale with other young knights in the garden late this afternoon," Morgan said. "But that was from a distance. I haven't talked to him all day either, although I know he came to Mass and back, afterwards."

"Very odd." Duncan was now looking downright worried, and Kelson frowned, trying to remember where he'd last glimpsed Dhugal.

"He was kneeling behind us in the choir during Mass today," Kelson said thoughtfully. He glanced at Araxie and she nodded her confirmation. "Normally, he's just down a place or two to my left."

"It's so strange," Duncan sighed. "One would think he was *trying* to avoid all of us."

"We'll find him, Duncan," Kelson reassured the Bishop with a squeeze of his shoulders.

"I think in the light of the news I have brought My Prince, that finding your friend is an excellent idea," Azim said quietly. "To assure us that he is well and safe, above all."

Duncan turned to Azim. "What are you implying, my Lord?"

Azim's news of Ibrahim was quickly told to Duncan, who scowled.

"Ivo!" Kelson called. "You, Dolfin, Davoran and Niall go look for Duke Dhugal at once!"

"Wait a moment, Sire, young man," Azim said quickly holding up an authoritative hand. "Having your squires help us look for the Duke is a wise idea but it may be too dangerous, especially for the younger ones.

"Do not confront the Duke, when you find him," he warned Ivo. "Simply come back and report to His Majesty where you saw him and what his state appeared to be."

Ivo glanced at Kelson who both nodded confirmation and waved dismissal.

"Kelson, Dhugal may already be down in the Great Hall," Araxie pointed out, placing a light hand on his arm. "They'll be getting ready to serve as soon as we arrive. That seems like the likeliest place to start looking for him."

"Ye-es," Kelson, agreed slowly, distracted from his concern for his foster brother. "And you and I will have to go down soon, ourselves. It is Michaelmas after all, and people will talk if we don't show up for your first major court occasion as queen. Nor do we want the whole court to know about this Ibrahim, I suspect."

Azim shook his head. "Best that the fewest possible people know."

"I'll go finish getting ready, and then we can go down," Araxie said. She disappeared back through the curtained doorway leading to her own quarters.

Nigel, Meraude, and Payne were waiting for them in the small anteroom off the Great Hall waiting for them to arrive before making their own appearance within.

"Yes, I've seen Dhugal today, but not to speak to and only as briefly as the rest of you," Nigel said thoughtfully when Azim's news had been reported to him. "He's already seated at the high table inside. I think perhaps he's had a bit too much to drink this afternoon, but otherwise he seems all right to me."

Duncan's worried expression lightened a trifle. "If the young fool brushed me off to go drink with his companions and then show up drunk for a Court feast, he'll surely hear about it from *me*," he said. "But I'm too relieved that he's safely accounted for to growl at him much."

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Allah, I am forty different kinds of a fool, Ibrahim thought. Taking on the appearance of the Duke of Cassan had *seemed* like a good idea at dawn this morning. But after the miserable day he'd passed and in his present dangerous situation, he had to admit it had been stupidity of the first order. Especially as far as keeping a low profile was concerned, and that was the cornerstone of his mission. He had entirely failed to account for how noticeable he'd be while looking like a tall red-haired duke in sky-blue. Virtually impossible to melt into a crowd while looking like *that*. And every time he'd tried to make himself inconspicuous preparing to make his move, *someone* would appear at his elbow at precisely the wrong moment and start chattering away. Dukes were evidently supposed to stay quite close to their king—another factor that had made it difficult to make his break for freedom. To avoid betraying himself through some unaccustomed behavior, he'd stayed as far away from the King of Gwynedd as he possibly could today, but that was not terribly far. And here he still was, pilloried at the High Table, decorated with red table cloths and bouquets of white lilies.

He'd also left the Duke of Cassan's accursed personal popularity entirely out of his reckoning. Having had to ride all the way back to the Castle, his knees aching after that interminable

Mass, he was then obliged to join some of the younger knights of the court in the castle gardens for a pint of that disgusting, bitter northern ale.

Filthy stuff! Ibrahim thought in irritation. *Worse than drinking horse piss. No wonder it's forbidden to us by the Prophet!*

It had also had an unforeseen effect on him— a feeling of not quite being able to rely on his feet and legs or upon his depth perception. All his life, Ibrahim had been nimble, strong and well-coordinated in his movements. Tripping over his own feet and bumping his shoulders into stone pillars was wholly humiliating, and not even centering himself had helped much. His concentration was also evidently off balance.

It did not help his state of mind to know that the *real* Duke of Cassan would be waking up in the stable loft about now. He'd be too groggy from the drugs Ibrahim had forced down him to be *much* trouble for the next hour, of course. Ibrahim had gagged him too, and trussed him well hogtying him with leather reins, pinched from various bridles stored in the stable tack room. Naked and defenseless, McLain couldn't betray Ibrahim, but someone was bound to discover the duke eventually. And if he wasn't careful, Ibrahim might give himself away long before that happened. A pretty, splendidly dressed girl at one of the lower tables was giving him furious looks—evidently, she was another of the real duke's favorites and felt ignored. If her eyes had been scimitars, Ibrahim would be sliced thinner than book pages, by now.

Ibrahim took a drink from his goblet, concluding that wine was merely objectionable in a different way from ale. He longed for the concoction his mother had often made for him when he was very small. She had squeezed lemons from her own lemon trees, thinned the mixture with water and had added honey to make a sweet/sour and very cooling drink for her first born son.

And these fools drink this abominable 'wine' for pleasure? He had been dizzy, but now he was nauseous as well. Of course, it might have been because of his day long fast required on account of the month of Ramadan. Solid food might help counteract his dizziness. The question was moot however, since he couldn't picture ever wanting to eat again. He was developing a fine, throbbing headache on top of his other miseries as well. And this lack of appetite was underlined when the servants brought in the main course – an enormous sucking pig roasted whole, and with an apple in its open mouth.

Allah, the things these infidels eat! First the ale and wine, and now they serve an entire pig at their feast! The very smell of the thing made him feel faint.

Ibrahim struggled—fortunately successfully—to hold his gorge as servants began slicing up the pork, and he accepted as little of the meat as was decently possible when his turn came to be served. The pale slice lay there on his trencher, the edge brown and crisp, still sizzling hot from the fire. He prolonged the act of cutting it into bite sized pieces for as long as he could, and managed to surreptitiously drop several morsels on the floor, to the delight of a brindled greyhound puppy near his place. The dog actually had the gall to jump up into Ibrahim's lap and snatch a sliver of meat right off his trencher.

Oh these people! They eat unclean animals and then keep others around them for company and allow them unspeakable liberties! He didn't grudge the meat at all, but still shoved the puppy down with more force than he'd intended. The creature yelped sharply as it landed, and Ibrahim could swear every head in the hall turned to look *right* at him.

So much for being inconspicuous and unmemorable!

"You're eating light tonight, brother," said a deep, cultured voice to Ibrahim's left. "I was beginning to think you were going to let Swift eat all your meat. Nonetheless, it's well not to allow him liberties, or he'll get fat and spoiled."

Ibrahim managed a sickly grin at the King. He had a healthy summer tan, and his hair under his glittering crown was deeply, and densely black. But for the pale gray eyes in that brown face, Ibrahim might almost think he was looking at one of his own people. The young queen to the King's left was hopeless in her pallor, though. Let *her* spend one season under the blazing sun of Djellarda or Um Al-

Zakar, and she'd become a dried-up husk of a woman. She did wear a veil, but in the Western manner, leaving her face entirely uncovered, robbing her own pale eyes of almost all their expressive power, in Ibrahim's view. She was not smiling at him, and one of her slim hands was caressing the puppy. The wretched pup belonged to *her*, then.

The King was smiling, but not with his eyes. They were thoughtful as they rested on Ibrahim's face.

"It's not like you to turn down roast pork however, Dhugal" the King went on lightly. "I thought it was one of your favorites?"

There was a command in that question, and Ibrahim knew there was nothing for it except to eat some of the terrible, Prophet-forbidden meat. He picked up McLain's dagger, speared a scrap of pork and ate it, swallowing it quickly after one or two chews, before smiling back at the King. The King's smile faded and his eyes were harder, now, as he gazed at the border dirk in Ibrahim's right hand.

Ibrahim had no idea what was the matter with holding his dagger in the right hand – had he broken some obscure Western custom of the table? These people were so uncivilized, what could *they* know about how to properly conduct themselves?

"Azim, Alaric—" the King said, lifting his own right hand

Enlightenment rapidly followed by panic made Ibrahim rise, shove his chair back hard and vault over the table before him all in one continuous movement. He sent dishes clattering to the floor as one toe caught the tablecloth and brought it part of the way with him. He did a shoulder roll on the hard floor as he landed, and was back on his feet, bolting for the door at the far end of the hall. People were shouting, screaming, behind them, but Ibrahim just kept running.

He was about three quarters of the way down the hall before a sheet of scarlet fire reared up directly in front of him, twice his own height and stretching clear to the side walls of the hall – causing more screams of panic behind him. It might not burn him as an ordinary fire would, but he'd not plough through that without some sort of damage. Ibrahim whirled, expecting a hail of arrows, but he'd not keep his back turned toward his enemies in the circumstances. They were running toward him now, and thus Ibrahim didn't see the brilliant blue lightning shaft fork down from the vaulted ceiling. All he knew was that something sharp and hot touched the very crown of his head. His entire body tingled for an excruciating moment, followed by an intense chill. Ibrahim slumped unconscious to the floor.

Azim reached the still form first, flipped Ibrahim onto his back and roughly turned the unconscious man's face to the light. Both the crimson fire and the blue lightning had disappeared.

"Ah, Ibrahim, it is the better for you that I found you alive," Azim whispered. "Although *you* might not feel the same way."

"He's alive for the *moment*," Duncan said grimly. "But Azim, if he's killed Dhugal, he shall pay for that with his own life."

"Indeed he shall," Kelson agreed, scowling down at the unconscious man.

Azim looked up briefly and then nodded. "He was taken in your hall and Duke Dhugal is a Duke of your realm as well as Bishop Duncan's son and your close personal friend. But let me Read Ibrahim and see what I can find out first."

Nigel and Morgan took it upon themselves to herd the Court away back to the tables at the far end of the Hall. Kelson did not stir, flanked to either side by Araxie and Duncan, who gripped the King's forearm tightly, the other hand clasped hard around his pectoral cross. None of them noticed Prince Payne lingering nearby as well.

Azim closed his eyes, his hands holding Ibrahim's head. The man's hair and skin both darkened, the mustache receded, but did not disappear, and a thin dark beard appeared as well. Azim bent over the man, probing deeply for several more minutes. Then he brought himself back to normal consciousness.

"We'll find young Dhugal in the stable loft, my Lord Bishop," Azim told Duncan at once. "Fortunately alive, although he has been heavily drugged."

Duncan closed his eyes, breathed a prayer of thanks, and crossed himself with a shaking hand.

"Amen," Kelson whispered. "Lord Azim, what are you giving him?"

Azim had produced a tiny glass vessel filled with deep yellow liquid from somewhere inside his clothing, and was now carefully pulling the stopper out of the neck.

"It's a highly potent variety of *merasha*, My Prince," Azim said. "They make it in the Southern deserts, and the substance is boiled longer and is twice as pure as that which you've encountered yourself." Azim smiled grimly. "Now it will suffice to keep Ibrahim from causing anyone more trouble for several hours. He gave some of the same stuff to the Duke, I believe. Even so, while we go find Dhugal, I would advise a close guard on him in a locked room."

Kelson turned and beckoned to a guard, giving him the appropriate orders, then realized that Duncan was no longer beside him.

"Gone to find young Dhugal I expect," Azim nodded. "We'd best hurry after him, Sire. He's going to need our help."

Quite a large party accompanied the King and Azim to the stable loft in the end, although Kelson only let a few people accompany them up the ladder.

Duncan already knelt there bent over the naked Dhugal who was rolled into a twitching fetal ball. Several lengths of leather lay in the hay on the loft floor beside Duncan and the red marks around Dhugal's wrists and ankles indicated how they'd been used.

Duncan's face was a mixture of fury and worry, compounded with relief when he saw who had climbed the loft ladder.

"He's a little better, but he was hog-tied and convulsing when I got here," Duncan said, in a clipped voice. "I had to knock him out again to be able to untie him."

Azim had headed for the corner of the loft and returned with a worn black leather satchel. He rummaged in it for a moment, then pulled out another glass vial that was twin to the one he'd had moments before. But this one was filled with colorless liquid.

"Give him this," Azim told Duncan briefly. "And rejoice that he's still alive."

Duncan obeyed, and once Dhugal had swallowed, he was quieter. Although he did groan and throw his arm over his eyes when Kelson moved his scarlet handfire nearer.

"Dim it a bit, Sire." Azim advised. "His eyes are very sensitive to light, right now. And I'm afraid young Dhugal is in for some unpleasant hours, my Lord Bishop. He'll not really be feeling himself until about this time tomorrow."

"As long as he *is* alive," Duncan whispered. "What may I give him?"

"Water," Azim replied. "Just keep pouring it down his throat, and when you think he's had enough, give him more. That's the fastest way to flush it out of his system."

"Payne, run and fetch some water," Kelson ordered, worried eyes on Dhugal. "We'd best get started with rinsing him out. And find Ciard O' Ruane and have him bring some pillows and blankets and a change of clothes up here. Dhugal might as well remain here until he's fit to negotiate the ladder, again."

Azim, nodded his agreement, then opened Ibrahim's satchel on the loft floor, spreading out the meager belongings it had contained. A few more stoppered bottles and vials, a soft leather pouch containing a set of wards, and a very old and limp straw hat with a wide brim to provide shade against the sun. It unrolled itself on the floor, and Azim tossed it to Duncan who at once placed it over Dhugal's face.

Azim lifted an eyebrow in question and picked up a boy's sleeveless woolen singlet. The initials L.L.F. had been embroidered at the neckline at the back of the garment. "Curious," Azim muttered, fingering the soft, fine-spun wool. "Could this be what Ibrahim came for?"

"That belonged to Liam," Kelson said, also studying the singlet. "He must have outgrown it, or perhaps it was just forgotten when he returned to Torenth."

"And that answers my question regarding what Ibrahim came to Rhemuth to achieve," Azim answered. "A thing belonging to Liam, and even better, one that was worn next to his skin. Teymuraz would have had a strong psychic link with which to do his nephew harm had Ibrahim delivered it to him."

Slowly Kelson and turned to look at Dhugal, now being given a drink of water by Duncan. The King's face was hard with anger.

"My Lord Azim, if Ibrahim were solely my prisoner, he would die for what he has done to my close friend and for what he meant to do," Kelson said quietly. "But Dhugal *is* still alive, and I realize that Ibrahim is of more value to us alive, especially if he can give us information concerning Teymuraz. Furthermore, he was an Anviller, and you are his superior in the Order. I am willing to allow you to take custody of him, and take him back to Djellarda with you if you wish it."

"The quality of mercy is mighty in the mightiest, Sire," Azim nodded, and smiled. "Also, Ibrahim could as easily have killed your friend while he was under his power, but he did not. Refraining from killing is a sign of hope, however small, that Ibrahim may yet redeem himself. And as you say, he is more valuable alive than dead."

"It's curious that Ibrahim should have come to Rhemuth looking for something belonging to Liam," Kelson said. "Why not Beldour instead?"

"Liam did spend four years in Rhemuth," Azim answered. "It's not so strange to assume that something belonging to him might still be here, as indeed it was, and the danger for Teymuraz's agent would have been far greater in Beldour or Torenthaly."

"As for the singlet, I'd advise burning it. Liam has no further need of it, and this way, it can't be used against him in the future, if Teymuraz makes another attempt."

"It shall be done tonight." Kelson agreed and smiled dryly. "Let Michael, the Archangel of fire, protect Liam."

Azim chuckled. "We Anvillers have more than a passing respect for St. Michael ourselves, what with our Michaeline origins. No doubt the Saint knew quite well that Ibrahim joined us under false pretenses all along, and is now getting some of his own back at an intruder."

When you think about it, it's highly appropriate to let Michael finish the job. Representing the Archangel at the *killijalay* was not precisely a stroke of luck for Teymuraz this summer. Nor for his agent tonight on Michaelmas itself."

The End