

*The Queen's Token*  
By: Marilyn North

**Rhemuth, 1105**

The solar bustled with activity. In a fortnight's time, Jehana and her ladies had to have new finery for the midsummer ball. A cat dozed on a sunhat in the corner. Fabric, thread, and lace covered every surface in the bright room. Jehana bent over her needlework, interweaving ribbons to create tiny crimson flowers. They encircled the neckline, contrasting the blue silk fabric.

The ladies chattered as they sewed, speculating about possible partners once the dancing began. They reviewed items for the menu, planning each course and the types of wines to be served. A shipment of lemons had arrived from the south, a rare treat; the punch would have an unusual flavor. As they talked, Jehana tied off the last stitch. She sampled a grape from a dish of fruit and cheese, inspecting the final flower.

"There! It's finally finished," she sighed.

"May I see it, your Highness?" Lady Alissa asked.

"Of course," the queen replied.

They spread out the gown, admiring the embroidered borders and full sleeves. Tiny ties connected the sleeves to the bodice. Complemented with full underskirts, Jehana knew she would stun the entire court with this gown. She began discussing how to dress her hair for the ball. Lady Alissa took her hair down to experiment, wielding an ivory comb to create a masterpiece of braids and white lilies. Then a page knocked on the door, and Lady Ilene admitted him.

"Your Highness, the King wishes to speak with you privately," he announced.

"Thank you, Robert," Jehana acknowledged. "Ladies, you are dismissed." She wondered what news might be so important, or perhaps he had romantic notions. She grinned foolishly.

Brion entered a few minutes later, still in his court robes, though he carried his crown in his hand. Moving to his wife's side, he kissed her.

"So that's why you wanted to see me alone," Jehana chuckled.

"I wish that there was time for more than a kiss, dear one," he smiled. "I've just received word that Eastmarch has rebelled."

Fear crawled slowly up Jehana's spine.

"We must mobilize to restore peace."

Jehana sank into a chair in a daze. "When?" she managed to whisper.

"Tomorrow," Brion replied.

"Then there will be no Midsummer ball." Her voice trailed as she realized that a rebellion was more important than a dance.

"I'm sorry, Jehana, but I must prepare tonight, and we leave at dawn. Morgan will serve as my squire."

Jehana's sorrow turned to outrage at mention of Alaric Morgan. "That Deryni halfbreed! I knew he was a bad influence on you," she snarled.

Brion's resolve never wavered. "Morgan is my squire, and he has always served me well. And as a Deryni, he has skills that none of my other escort can wield."

Color drained from Jehana's face as she realized the full implication of the statement. She hated the mere thought of using magic, it was unholy.

"You know full well that the Church forbids use of magic, you would endanger your immortal soul by encouraging him," she protested.

"Then all my ancestors are damned as well, Jehana. Is King Cinhil damned by defeating the Festils by magic? I will don his ancient armor tomorrow morning. "

"I see I cannot sway you," Jehana spoke coldly. "Then don't expect my blessing!"

"One day you will understand," Brion replied softly. "But I must perform my duty as king, adieu." He turned to the door and placed his hand on the knob, hesitating.

Jehana's rage swelled out of control, and she seized the nearest object. Hurling a left dancing slipper at his back, she shrieked, "Just don't get yourself killed!"

Brion turned to pick up the slipper. "I'll take any tokens I can get into battle, I'll just keep this." And he retreated through the door.

Alone, Jehana burst into tears, cradling the other slipper against her breast.

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Outside, Brion strode through the courtyard, inspecting the preparations for battle. The ring of hammers on metal echoed as blacksmiths shod the horses. As fast as four horseshoes were finished, they were fitted to a mount. Morgan shadowed him, ready to carry out any command. By evening, all seemed to be ready for departure at dawn. In early morning light, Brion rode off with his troops, fully prepared to put down the rebellion. Unbeknownst to his men, he carried a satin dancing slipper under his breastplate, against his heart. His queen's unwilling gift would help sustain him, no matter what challenges he might face.