

A Gallant Celebration

A 12 Dancing Princesses short story

By K. M. Shea

Three days before Quinn's wedding to Emerys, they came for her.

Quinn had *finally* succeeded in setting Alastryn off on a new pet project. (The beautiful elf had spent twenty minutes showing Quinn different variations of white tablecloths that Quinn, frankly, couldn't tell the difference between, so the reprieve was much needed.)

Lest Alastryn change her mind and call Quinn back, Quinn set her pace at a quick clip as she slipped out of the elven home.

"Finally free, eh?" Emerys leaned against an iron fence, flexing his fingers to stir up his magic.

"Yes." Quinn closed the door behind her then hurried to join him. "You knew where I was yet didn't think to come save me?"

Emerys smiled, making his handsome face turn devastating. "You thought I would risk getting caught myself? Hah! At least one of us ought to be having a good time."

She rolled her eyes. "Your support is overwhelming."

"Think of it this way. Soon you'll outrank her, and you can tell her to go pick flowers and sing or something when she bothers you about the correct dishware for a festive winter tea."

"If anyone ever told her that, it would surely be the last thing they said. And given that you *already* outrank her and are incapable of standing against her, I doubt marrying you is going to give me an edge."

"Grumpy, are we?" Emerys stretched his arms above his head. "Next time you get taken, see if I try and help you."

"You didn't help me *this* time either!"

The sound of synchronized claps and the stomp of feet made Quinn turn away from Emerys and join him in peering down the central road that strolled through Sideralis.

The weirdest procession she had ever seen meandered in their direction. It consisted of Quinn's old band mates: Leigh, Guy, Roy, Kenneth, and their new recruit, Moira.

Guy led the charge, carrying a huge basket filled with flower petals, which he daintily and individually placed on the road. Behind him was Leigh, bellowing out a song with Roy "attempting" to harmonize. Kenneth and Moira brought up the back, performing a choreography of claps, stomps, and knee slaps.

"Ooooh, our girl is getting married, married soon she'll be! To a lad who has a noggin, and a face that makes you weep. Aye, we're going to miss her dearly; we'll drink this toast to her. And if her lad makes her sob, we'll START PLANNING HIS FUNERAL!" Leigh and Roy shouted, breaking the song off for the threat.

"I'm fairly certain that's not how the song goes," Quinn said.

"I've heard worse," Emerys said.

"Hail, Quinn! We're here to drag you off to one last night of revelry and fun!" Leigh laughed.

"A send-off before your wedding, if you will," Roy said.

"Because once you're the Elf Queen, you can't go to inns or pubs," Guy chimed in. "Wouldn't be seemly."

Moira opened her mouth to speak, but she blushed bright red in her shyness and could only manage a squeak.

"Yes," Kenneth said.

Quinn's heart squeezed with warmth, and she laughed. "Thank you. I think a night in Navia is exactly what I need."

Emerys slung his arm across Quinn's shoulders. "Great, where are we going?"

Leigh shook her pointer finger at the Elf King. "No, no. You are not coming with us."

Emerys blinked. "You're joking."

"Band Gallant only." Roy rocked back on his heels and swung his arms to keep his balance. "We have important matters to discuss and memories to re-live."

"And we don't want to pay for your drinks," Guy added.

"I can pay for myself," Emerys protested.

Kenneth bowed slightly. "We thank you for your cooperation in staying behind."

Leigh stepped forward and took custody of Quinn's left arm, tugging her from Emerys' grasp. "Come, Quinn. Let's go."

Roy folded his arms behind his head and grinned widely as he started to walk backwards. "We're going to the Tipsy Owl!"

"It will be a real hoot." Guy retreated the way they came, still carefully placing flowers on the ground in front of Quinn.

"Quinn," Emerys called. "You can't seriously mean to leave me behind!"

"You get me for the rest of my life, Emerys." Quinn smiled and waved as Leigh pulled her along. "I think you can spare me for a night."

Emerys scowled.

Moira, the last to leave, curtsied to him. "F-f-f-f...f-farewell, Y-Your Majesty," she stammered.

Quinn could hear him grumble, but he remained stationary as Quinn and Band Gallant left Sideralis, picking up their song once more.

The Tipsy Owl was a well-kept and equally well-crowded pub favored by Farset soldiers when they had something to celebrate.

The paint on the walls peeled a little, and all the rafters and surfaces in the pub were occupied by stuffed owls—which routinely fell down on top of unsuspecting customers—but the food was some of the best in Navia, and the price wasn't too bad either.

As such, Quinn wasn't shocked when Leigh threw the pub door open, revealing a sea of brown and green Farset soldier uniforms.

“We’re here!” Guy threw a fistful of flowers into the air, then leaped backwards to avoid the head-sized stuffed owl another customer threw at him.

“Guy, what has you running your mouth this time?” a soldier called.

Roy joined Guy at the front of their little procession. “We’ve got the future Queen of the Elves with us tonight,” Roy said. “We’re here to throw her a proper send-off.”

Some of the noise dropped with this announcement, and a number of soldiers peered at them. “Midnight Lake—you hiding in there?” one grizzled woman asked.

“Aye, I’m here.” Quinn slipped between Roy and Guy to smile pleasantly.

“Then what are you waiting for? Come in!” An older, male soldier said with such enthusiasm it was almost a roar.

The soldiers rearranged themselves, opening up a table at the heart of the pub for Quinn and her companions.

The barmaid—who was dressed in enough suede and leather to be mistaken for a soldier—delivered the first round of drinks and rattled off the three food choices for the night—roast chicken, venison stew, and meat pie—before taking their orders and hustling off.

Quinn leaned back in her chair with a groan. “It’s good to see you all again.”

“How was your time with Lady Enchantress Angelique?” Leigh asked.

“Good—and productive, I think,” Quinn said.

Kenneth tapped the side of his mug. “You were able to aid her?”

Quinn nodded. “I helped her prepare for an undercover role just before Emerys arrived to bring me back.”

Guy raised an eyebrow. “Can the Lady Enchantress—with her beauty—truly ever be ‘undercover’?”

Recalling the grubby appearance the enchantress had adopted far too easily, she shrugged. “I don’t think it will be a problem. But tell me the news. What has changed?”

“Roy is still making strides with his lady-love,” Leigh tattled.

“Leigh!” Roy turned bright red with mortification and groaned.

Quinn smirked as she studied Roy. “Is that so? Then I have to ask, why didn’t you bring Princess Brittany with you tonight?”

“Yeah, Roy, why?” Guy asked. “Are you ashamed of us? I can’t imagine we would ever do anything to embarrass you.” He grabbed another fistful of flowers from his dwindling store in the basket and blew them across the table at his band mate.

“I didn’t invite her because I’m taking it *slow*,” Roy said firmly.

Leigh nodded in understanding. “That’s good. You show too much at once, and she’ll realize what a dolt you are and run away.”

Roy squawked.

Kenneth slightly narrowed his eyes. “She *is* aware you are courting her, yes? It’s not just in your mind?”

“Well, I like this! How many years of friendship, and you all finally reveal your colors.” Roy scowled at the group.

Quinn and the others laughed, but Kenneth leaned forward. “You have not yet confirmed this is not a delusion of yours.”

“I called on her yesterday after patrol,” Roy snarled.

“Ahahah,” Guy laughed. “That’s why you were carrying around that bush last night, trying to wriggle your way into the princess’ greenery-filled heart, eh?”

“Can we change the subject?” Roy grumbled.

“No,” Leigh said.

Quinn stared at the floor. *I thought I saw something black down there.* “Maybe we should take some pity on him.”

“If we don’t tease Roy about Princess Brittany, our only choice will be to serenade you with the elvish love songs we had Cynbryn teach us two weeks ago,” Leigh said.

“I hope you like animal comparisons to your chest and waist,” Guy said. “’Cuz the elves may be poets, but they’re *weird* poets.”

Moira cleared her throat and managed to squeak out, “I thought they were beautiful.”

Guy rolled his eyes, but Leigh smiled and patted her hand.

“Moira,” Kenneth started, “fills the role you left behind of the sympathetic and understanding soldier.”

Quinn grinned at Moira, who sank into her seat with embarrassment, though she did offer a shaky smile in return.

“I’m glad there’s someone who can offer a calm voice in the midst of you scoundrels.” Quinn wrinkled her forehead when she felt something crawl across her boot and again glanced under the table.

“She can’t play bait, though,” Guy scowled. “So that’s been left to me. I hope you feel real bad.”

“Just the worst,” Quinn reassured him as she peeked under the table. *Nothing...unless...*

“Don’t be too hard on Moira,” Leigh scolded. “She has guts! Moira, you need to tell him you have guts.”

Moira silently shook her head.

Guy snorted. “She fainted when we first introduced her to Quinn and the Elf King.”

“And then she single-handedly killed a troll that afternoon,” Quinn reminded him before she swiveled her gaze to Moira. “Don’t mind him. He’s just mad his mother makes you spice donuts on your days off.”

“*You* always get cream tarts,” Guy pointed to Quinn, “*You* get spiced donuts! Why don’t *I* get anything? I’m her son—her own flesh and blood!” He folded his arms across his chest and stared at Moira. “Though you *are* cute.”

Leigh choked on a mouthful of mead, and Roy—who was in the process of chugging his pint—actually spit his out.

“Manners,” Kenneth chided.

“We need a burp-cloth for His-Future-Highness,” Guy called.

A barmaid tossed a rag to Quinn, who started mopping up the mess with it.

Roy leveled a finger at Guy. “Don’t even start—I’ve said no matter what happens, I’m not going to take the title of prince *or* leave Gallant. I’ve already told King Dirth that!”

“That serious you’ve already spoken to your future father-in-law about it, hmm?” Leigh asked.

“We are not talking about this!” Roy said. “We are celebrating Midnight’s good fortune in finding someone worthy of her.”

Quinn tilted her head—she thought she heard a familiar mutter—and caught a wayward stuffed owl that fell from one of the rafters and shed feathers on the table.

“And,” Roy continued, “we *should* be discussing the sudden awakening in Guy’s maturity level that made him realize Moira is cute. Kenneth, why haven’t you had a talk with him and warned him off or something?”

Kenneth shrugged.

Quinn again peered under the table nonchalantly. “Why would he have to do that? Guy is honorable. He’s not going to do anything disreputable.”

“Because Kenneth gave *me* that lecture about *you*,” Roy complained.

“Ho-ho,” Leigh chortled. “I thought we would reminisce tonight, but I never dreamed we would air this much dirty laundry!”

The door was thrown open, and Bridget—wearing her Red Rider cloak—stormed in. “Sorry I’m late—King Dirth called a last-minute meeting with the Color Riders.” Bridget stopped by Quinn’s chair to hug her and kiss her on the cheek, then gestured to the barmaid as she sat down in a free seat.

“*She*’s not Band Gallant!” an outraged voice whispered.

As quick as lightning, Quinn reached under the table and snatched up a black mouse who had taken up residence next to her foot. “Emerys,” she said. “You told Alastryn you would never again shape change into something smaller than a wolf.”

“Obviously,” Emerys fluffed his whiskers. “Or she would know to look for me in this shape!”

Quinn sighed deeply.

“Don’t worry. I think I’ve figured out a way for us to shape-change together,” Emerys assured her.

Bridget eyed Emerys-the-mouse. “Still sure you want to marry him?”

“What?” Emerys indignantly squeaked, the mouse instincts once again getting the better of him.

“I mean, he is a king, and as handsome as sin, but he also seems like a lot of trouble,” Bridget said.

“You told me you approved of me,” Emerys said. “What happened?”

“I still approve of you,” Bridget said easily. “But she’s my sister. I want whatever she wants.”

Emerys wriggled in Quinn’s palm with mouse-rage, and Quinn laughed as she set him on the table top.

She looked at her band, her sister, and her fiancé. *Soon, everything is going to change. The continent will go to war. The Farsēt army will be called up. Bridget will be sent into battle for certain with her Magicus mounts. And Emerys and I will fight with the elves.*

It was a grim future, but in the warmth of the pub—with stuffed owls falling around the place like rain—sitting with many of the people she cherished most in life, it filled her with determination.

My future is vastly different from the one I had planned, but queen or not, I'm not backing down from the fight with the Chosen. There will be no more curses like the one Emerys and the elves endured.

“What are you thinking?” Emerys asked as he slowly worked his way up her arm so he could stand on her shoulder.

Quinn glanced at her fiancé, then smiled at her sister and Band Gallant. “I’m just wondering who will get married first: Guy and Moira or Roy and Brittany.”

Bridget leaned in with interest. “What did you just say?”

“You missed it,” Leigh boasted. “Guy admitted our Moira is pretty!”

Bridget slapped a hand over her heart. “You mean Guy might be maturing? I never thought that would happen!”

“Careful not to draw attention to yourself,” Guy said sourly. “Or the staff might look at you and think you’re underage due to your short stature. OW!” he grunted when Bridget kicked him viciously under the table.

“I’m not *short*,” Bridget growled.

“No, you’re just delusional,” Guy grumbled. “OW!”

“I’d stop it, Guy,” Roy said. “I called her short when I first met her, and she still won’t acknowledge me.”

“There seem to be a lot of pesky flies around tonight,” Bridget said.

“See?” Roy said.

“A toast,” Kenneth said, restoring some order.

Quinn held her mug aloft. “To Gallant!”

“No,” Kenneth said. “To Quinn of Midnight Lake. May she be happy with King Themerysaldi and as good of a queen as she is a soldier.”

“To Quinn of Midnight Lake!” the band shouted, making a few more owls topple over and hit other customers.

Quinn’s cheeks hurt from her wide smile as she looked around the table in her joy, and Emerys huddled against her neck.

Some of the other soldiers turned to face them after getting hit with owls. “What’s this, making a toast to one of ours?” a soldier asked.

“Come on, soldiers. All together!” a second man chimed in.

As one, the customers of the Tipsy Owl raised their mugs. “To Quinn of Midnight Lake!”

The End