

Penny White

and

The Marriage of Gryphons

Penny White # 3

By Chrys Cymri

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## Chapter One

There had be to some way to get Holly to leave the church so I could speak to the bats alone. But my churchwarden seemed determined to make the most of having my attention, perhaps due to the fact that I'd cancelled several meetings we'd arranged.

'And this is where the chap drilled to check for deathwatch beetle,' Holly was saying as she crouched beside the pew. I bit my lower lip, hoping that her ancient knees would allow her to stand up again without my help. Chances were that neither of us would survive close physical contact. 'He says he found bore dust.'

I looked back the length of the building. That didn't take long, as Saint Wulfram's church was as small as the village it served. 'How many pews are infested?'

'He said he'd come back to do some more investigations.' She sniffed. 'Perhaps, Vicar, you could show some interest by being here next time? This church is your responsibility, after all.'

'This parish is my responsibility,' I reminded her. 'The people, not the building.'

Her brown eyes narrowed. 'This has been a place of worship for nearly eight hundred years. You'd let it fall down around our ears?'

'Deathwatch beetle only affects wood.' And because I was in a bad mood, I couldn't help myself saying, 'We can always take out the pews and put in chairs instead.'

'You'd lose half of your congregation,' Holly warned me. 'And there's not many of us to start with. When I first started coming to Saint Wulfram's, fifty-five years ago...'

Despite my best efforts, I found myself tuning out. Not that it would matter. I knew this part of Holly's litany by heart. Those had been the glory days of this village church, when the pews and Sunday school had been packed every week. The rot, according to her, had set in when the Church of England had abandoned the delights of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer for 'modern rubbish.' Bring back the archaic language and constant bewailing of our sins and people would rush back in. I had my doubts.

We walked back up to the chancel, where the long unused choir stalls were possibly also infected. I stared up at a particularly ghastly Victorian painting of Jesus patting small children on their heads, and wondered if I could genetically engineer a beetle to eat horrible artwork. 'When's the chap coming back?' I asked when Holly finally stopped to draw breath.

'February the 20th,' she snapped. '10am. You'll be here.'

I pulled out my iPhone to check my calendar. 'I'll be here.' Holly waited while I tapped on the screen to enter the information. 'And I think that's all?'

Her white hair waved slightly as she shook her head. 'What about the font? You know Mrs Jones doesn't want it moved.'

'But she's the only one to raise a complaint,' I pointed out. 'Everyone else seems happy about it, or doesn't really care.'

'It's been in the bell ringing chamber for decades,' Holly said. 'Why move it out now?'

‘Because I can’t fit a baptism party into that small space.’ I found myself using the mantra which I often had to employ in Holly’s presence. *She’s a beloved child of God, she’s a beloved child of God, she’s a beloved child of God.* ‘Besides, a font should be by the entrance to the church, symbolising that baptism is entrance to the Church.’

‘But we never see those people again.’ Holly crossed her arms over her thin chest. ‘Why should we upset Mrs Jones for them?’

‘Mrs Jones will survive,’ Morey said from his perch on the pulpit. Of course, only I could see and hear the cat-sized gryphon, so his interjection was not helpful.

‘And it opens up the bell chamber for other uses,’ I continued. ‘We could put down carpet and use the area for children’s activities.’

‘If you ever manage to get any children to come here on a Sunday.’

‘And whose fault is that?’ Morey asked. ‘You’re the one who tells parents off if their children won’t sit still.’

My fingernails dug into my palms. If only I were as free as my Associate to speak my mind to my only churchwarden. ‘The plans have been agreed. Mrs Jones will survive.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ Morey chimed in. ‘You can’t expect a vicar to bow to the tyranny of the minority.’

‘Mrs Jones has been coming to this church since she was two weeks old,’ Holly continued. ‘That’s over ninety years, Vicar. That should count for something.’

‘I’ll bear it in mind,’ I said as sweetly as I could manage. ‘By the way, the film crew will be arriving soon. Do you want to go out and meet them? Make sure they don’t knock into anything in the churchyard?’

‘They can wait.’

So I was forced to pull out a priest’s trump card. ‘And I’d like some time alone. To pray.’

Of course, there was no good retort to that. Holly opened her mouth, then shut it with an audible click. With a whiff of perfume, she turned on her heel and marched out of the south door.

‘Prayer,’ Morey said, a purple-grey blur as he flew to my left shoulder. I grimaced slightly as falcon talons and cat claws pressed through fleece and shirt and into my skin. ‘I do hope you meant it.’

‘Of course I did,’ I lied. ‘And then I’ll tackle the bats. You need to go.’

His feathers were lifted in annoyance. ‘I’ve never eaten a bat in my life.’

‘But they don’t know that.’ I pushed at him. ‘Go on. Off.’

Morey launched himself upwards and exited through the still open door. I turned towards the altar, and stilled myself for a moment. *Hello God, it’s me, just checking in. How are you? Oh, that’s great. Me? Well, I’m fine. Nothing a good long spell in Lloegyr wouldn’t cure. Oh, what’s that? Yes, yes, I’m well aware, I’m only allowed to go there part time. Many thanks for reminding me.*

Duty done, I lifted my eyes to the shifting shapes of black and grey hanging from the decorated beams above the altar. ‘I know you’re there,’ I told them. ‘I have the Sight, as you must have realised. And I want to speak to your magister.’

Silence. The mass of bats froze. This only made them easier to see, and confirmed that they were not a native British species. Which could only mean one thing. They must be vampires. 'Come on, come on,' I said crossly. 'I'm the Vicar General of Incursions for Nenehampton Diocese. I know all about the world of Daear. You've left Lloegyr through a thin place, haven't you? Send down your magister so we can have a proper chat.'

High-pitched squeaks and a flurry of movement told me that I must be right. I stood my ground. If necessary, I knew a vampire archdeacon upon whom I could call for assistance. But I'd rather handle this myself. 'And I should warn you,' I added, 'I can understand Welsh, so don't think your national language is beyond mere humans!'

Finally, one bat separated himself from the rest and dropped down. For a moment he hovered in front of me, grey-brown fur gleaming in the light streaming through the clear glass windows. Then he transformed, becoming a dark haired, human looking male. A very slender and very nude human looking male.

I concentrated on looking at his face. 'Magister? I'm Penny White. May I have the holding of your name?'

The vampire grinned, revealing his sharp canines. 'Of course,' he said, his voice lilting in a thick Welsh accent. 'Brenin Gafr, it is. Why do you speak to us, Father Penny?'

One day I'd have to find out why citizens from Lloegyr always addressed a female priest with a masculine title. 'Just have a look.' I pointed at the plastic sheet covering the altar. It was covered with mounds of bat droppings. 'From your colony, right?'

He shrugged. I found my eyes wandering down his hairless chest, and I had to yank them back to his face. 'It's very cold at night. Too very cold to fly outside.'

'I don't mind you resting in this church.' And that was the truth. 'But you need to control where you defecate.'

'Defecate?'

Did he really not understand the word, or was he trying to push me? I pointed again at the brown sludge. 'That is the result of defecation.'

'Oh, you mean--' and he used a word in Welsh which my tutor had not seen fit to teach me. 'But there is plastic, and your woman cleans. We have seen this.'

'Not good enough,' I told him. 'I want you all to defecate in one place. I'll bring in a bucket--a *bwced*--for you to use. And once it's warm again, I expect you to go outside.'

The vampire lifted his head and squeaked up to his colony. My eardrums ached as a high-pitched conversation flowed back and forth. Then the black eyes were brought back to mine. '*lawn*. So we will do.'

And, of course, I had to ask, 'What will you feed on, while you are with us?'

Brenin laughed. 'None of you, *dynol*. You all taste of fat and sugar. We seek healthier blood.'

I didn't know whether to be relieved or insulted. 'Great. And another question. Why are you here?'

He studied me for a long moment. Then he said, simply, 'Bad times are coming.'

Then Brenin returned to bat form and joined his colony. I chewed my lower lip as I stared up at the shifting mass. Bad times for vampires? Or for Lloegyr? I wished I knew.

I checked my wristwatch and hurried out of the church. As I'd expected, the camera crew were setting up on the churchyard. They had brought several hand-held units, a larger one resting on one man's shoulder, and a large light deflector which glimmered in the bright winter's day. The director, a tall woman who never seemed to remember my name, was conferring with the producer, Lewis.

My ears twitched at the sound of Morey barking out orders in Welsh. Several dragons had taken seats a short distance away. A bright red one was resting a foot on a gravestone so he could clean mud from his dark claw. Morey was dwarfed by the dragon, who was twice the size of a horse and endowed with sharp teeth. He dropped his foot, but the gravestone was now listing badly. I sighed, wondering how I would explain this to my churchwarden.

The dragon rumbled some insults. I picked out the Welsh word *clust* and wondered if Morey were being mocked for the bandage wrapped around his left ear. But what would a dragon know about the marriage proposals of gryphons?

Morey flew over to a nearby tree. 'He's not here.'

I moved away from the other humans, who of course could neither see nor hear gryphon or dragons. They lacked a sarcastic Associate to give them the Sight. 'Who's not?'

'Your dragon boyfriend. The search dragon. Raven.'

'He's not my boyfriend,' I said steadily. 'Peter is. A nice human male.'

Morey cocked his head. 'Clyde seems to think Raven is your boyfriend.'

'What would a snail shark know?' I asked, although I felt a stab of guilt as I did so. If it hadn't been for Clyde, I would have died from the thrust of a unicorn's horn. But I had told no one of my encounter in the unicorns' forest, or the promise I'd made to their Archdruid. And Raven, who had failed to save me, hadn't appeared in my life since. I missed his weekly visits, but I was not going to send a rat to find him. The dragon would have to find his own way past his disappointment in himself.

A movement further down the churchyard caught my eye. Holly was talking to a well-dressed man, and pointing at a gravestone. Something Holly said caused the man to raise a handkerchief to dab his eyes, and I frowned, wondering what my churchwarden was doing.

Then a car pulled up at the church gate, and a woman emerged. She was dressed in black and wore a dog collar. As she marched up to the director, I realised that this was the actress chosen to play the priest from my blog and book, *The Confessions of a Manic Preacher*. And I felt insulted. Okay, so I'd recently added another year to my life, but I felt certain that I looked young for my thirty-seven years. The only lines around my eyes were laugh lines, and there was no grey in my shoulder-length brown hair. This girl

they'd hired was at least ten years younger than me, and, just to add insult to injury, she was two dress sizes smaller.

The director looked up, and her eyes found me. 'Janet! Could you come over?'

'Penny,' I muttered under my breath for the hundred time. 'Coming!'

As I walked across the uneven ground, I saw that a couple of elves had come to watch the filming. They still wore their blue and black uniforms, so I wasn't sure whether they were on or off duty police officers. I gave them a quick smile as I walked past. As one might expect of a race with slick black hair and pointy ears, they showed a Vulcan like absence of emotion in return.

'Janet, we're nearly ready here,' the director said to me. 'You've had all the paperwork from the church?'

'Yes, I have, Laura.' I turned to the actress and held out my hand. 'Hi, I'm Penny White. The writer of the blog and book which you're filming.'

Her handshake was limp and her nails too perfect. 'Leslie Winston-Smith. But you know that already.'

I didn't, but being a vicar teaches you tact and diplomacy. 'Of course. You were excellent in that series.'

'Of course,' Leslie purred. 'I put my heart and soul into every role. But you'd understand, being a vicar, right?'

'Heart and soul,' I echoed. 'Well, I'll leave you to it. You've got my number if you need anything.'

Laura nodded. 'We're really excited about this, aren't we, Leslie? This magical world you've created, Lloegyr, it's ridiculous in all the best ways. Imagine, a parallel world with dragons and unicorns! I predict lots of views over the web.'

'Yes, ridiculous,' I echoed. I had to remind myself that this was the very reason why the Church was allowing the production to go ahead. Despite our best efforts, humans still sometimes encountered the beings which slipped through from Daear. My blog, book, and the webisodes were meant to convince people that this was, as Laura had said, ridiculous. The thought that I had become part of a propaganda campaign still made me uneasy.

I would have liked to stay and watch, but parish duties called me away. Why citizens from Lloegyr would want to see the filming was beyond me. At some point, when there were less humans around, I would have to ask them. If I could muster the necessary Welsh.

Morey dropped down to my shoulder as I strode to my car. I glanced around, noted the lack of humans in hearing range, and asked him, 'How does this really work? I mean, I can understand why people's minds dismiss dragons and gryphons and so on, because our brains find it hard to believe that any of you exist. But that gravestone is half knocked over because of a dragon, so that's real. And wouldn't people notice the marks your claws leave in my coat?'

'I've never bothered to worry about how the Sight works,' Morey told me. 'Your problem, Black, is that you think too much.'

There were times when my Associate's nickname for me wore thin. 'That's part of my job,' I insisted. 'To understand how all this works. So I can help to protect your world.'

As I unlocked the door of my ancient Ford, I glanced back at the camera crew. Leslie was being positioned by the church door. A red book was in her hands, and the thin sunlight caught on the gold lettering on the cover. I blinked. There was something almost familiar about the scene.

Morey squawked as I lifted him from my shoulder and deposited him onto the roof of my car. Then I hurried back down the path. Laura raised her head as I approached. 'Yes, Susan?'

'That book.' I pointed. 'It's the *ASB. The Alternative Service Book*. We've not used that since the Millennium.'

The director frowned. 'We borrowed this from BBC Cymru. It's the one they use in all of their productions.'

'It's out of date.' Then a thought struck me, and my breath caught in my throat. 'All of their productions?'

'All of them, they have tight budgets. Just like me.' She pushed her rimless glasses back from her nose. 'It's not important. No one's going to notice.'

I had to swallow to bring moisture back into my mouth. 'I'll get you a *Common Worship* book. That brings you up to date.'

Laura waved a hand. 'All right, let's make a trade.' She took the *ASB* and pressed it into my hands. 'I'm sure the BBC would prefer to keep vicars happy.'

I hurried back to the car, lowered the *ASB* slowly and reverently into the boot, and brought back my own copy of *Common Worship*. Then I drove home, making my turns carefully, well aware of the precious object which my Ford now carried. Well, beyond one female priest and a small gryphon.

James had made himself scarce and Morey stayed in the study, catching up on *Neighbours* with Clyde at his side. I forced myself not to fret that the gryphon's fascination with Australian soap operas had rubbed off on the young snail shark, and instead paid attention to the handsome man enjoying the evening meal which I'd cooked for him. We'd been dating for eight months now, so I knew Peter well enough to offer nothing more exotic than chilli on rice, albeit accompanied by a very nice Châteauneuf-du-Pape. I'd even splashed out for one of the better years.

It was only after all the dishes had been cleared that I retrieved the *ASB* from the lounge. 'Here it is,' I told him as I handed over the heavy volume. 'The director said BBC Wales use it in all of their TV series. It must be the one.'

Peter laid the book onto the table. 'Are you sure? Can it really be the one from *The Family of Blood*?'

'I'm certain.' I touched the cover. 'Just think, this was only a few feet away from David Tennant.'

'Wonderful *Doctor Who* episode.' Peter very carefully held his wine glass away from the book as he took a sip. 'Although the *Virgin New Adventures* novel was better.'

'You're only saying that,' I teased him, 'because you know that Sylvester McCoy is my favourite Doctor.'

'Maybe.' The lines around his eyes only made him look distinguished, and there wasn't that much grey in his dark hair. 'I guess there's no way to find out for certain?'

'Not really.' I coughed. 'The director allowed me to trade for it. But the BCC might want it back if they realised I had a real, actual prop. I'm certain it could fetch good money on eBay.'

'My dear vicar,' Peter said, 'this seems rather unethical of you.'

'It's only human nature.'

And he laughed as he caught the reference. 'Well, I'm off duty. I feel no need to arrest you.'

We exchanged views about a recent *Star Trek* fan production while he switched to orange juice and I poured myself some more wine. Then I walked him to the door. 'Sorry, I know it's still early,' he apologised. 'But like I said, I have to go to Birmingham tomorrow. I'm getting up at the crack of dawn to catch my train.'

'That's fine.' I picked his coat off the bannister and handed it to him. 'See you Saturday?'

'Certainly.' He bent down to kiss me on the lips. This was still a rather recent development in our relationship, and I held him close to savour it. Then he was gone into the chilly February evening. I returned the *ASB* to the display cabinet. Then I poured myself another glass of red wine, popped the DVD of *Family of Blood* into my TV, and took a seat to watch Martha convince the Tenth Doctor that he had to accept his destiny.