

*Under the
Moons
of Riadorf*

**AND OTHER TALES
FROM THE
DORGIAN GALAXY**

**BY CLAIRE RASMUSSEN
& BELLE HEARTLEY**

**THIS VOLUME IS DEDICATED TO ALL OF OUR
LOYAL FANS:
MAY YOUR SUPPORT EVER BE REWARDED THUS!**

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Introduction

by Dr. Bethany Von Werner, author of *The Science of Romance*

The first time I read *UtMoR* I understood that I was privileged to be one of the first to read a literary work that would prove to be a turning point in the genre. Since its publication in '02, others have tried to recapture *l'esprit d'escalier*, the metonymy, the teleology of *UtMoR*, but without success. How could any other authors equal the unique chemistry produced by the collaboration of Rasmussen and Heartley?

Indeed, even I could not imagine that Rasmussen and Heartley would go on to create what would become the most genre challenging work of literature since Dale Carnegie's *bildungsroman* was published in 1936. Others might be wary: could any sequel live up to the precedent set by *UtMoR*, a book that changed my, and I dare say, many lives? In *Upon the Seas of Ill'a'n'o*, I am proud to say, Rasmussen and Hartley showed themselves equal to the task. Each installment in the Dorgian Cycle not only expands the universe they have built, but challenges and upends the reader's presuppositions; Consider the revelations of *FftBoBIV* in light of events in *OtWotSS*, and the total deconstruction of the reader's moral authority!

That is why I was overjoyed to hear that Rasmussen and Heartley were re-releasing *UtMoR*, together, for the first time, with *Between the Rings of Lambda*. Back to back, these two novelettes act as palimpsest for each other: The tenderness, the eloquence, the morganatic charm, all the qualities which helped *UtMoR* redefine the genre, all are still evident, but in addition, readers will be blown away by the challenge offered to our very understanding of causality. What Heartley and Rasmussen have produced is a work that undoubtedly functions as a sharp rebuke to the close-mindedness of the scientific community, and which will shortly take its place in history next to *De Revolutinibus*.

*Under the
Moons
of Riadorf*

CHAPTER ONE

The Duchess Andrinara Zuera Francel III paced nervously in the palace garden, ignoring the beautiful blooms of the zekarac tree which ordinarily gave her such pleasure. Her seafoam-colored gown of xarbenien silk streamed out behind her, and her violet eyes flashed with temper as she read the holo-letter she held clenched in one hand over for the third time.

“Elric, I have no choice,” she said, at last. “I must marry Alistair of the Dorgian Empire, for if I do not, Emperor Jakrung, his father, will bring his armies to bear against Neridan. And I love my people too well to let them suffer through the privations of a war we could not win.”

“But my lady!” Elric protested. He had been the Duchess’s friend since their childhood, though he was seven years her elder, and when her parents had died tragically just before Andrinara’s fourteenth birthday, Elric had pledged to protect and advise the young ruler for as long as he should live. “Surely, there is another way!”

Duchess Andrinara bowed her head, her sleek raven-black tresses falling forward from their neat bob to cover her flushed face. “There is not, Elric. Please see that my ship is prepared. This marriage is inevitable, and I do not like to delay unpleasant things.”

A scant three days later, Andrinara was presented to Emperor Jakrung and his son, Crown Prince Alistair, on their home planet of Riadorf, for the first time. She wore the traditional costume of a bride-to-be of the Riadorfian people, an outfit calculated to win the trust of her future husband and father-in-law.

For Andrinara, her face concealed demurely beneath the three-layered veil that signified a maiden’s connection to the triple moons of Riadorf and invoked fertility in the marriage bed, had a plan! She had traveled to Riadorf only

lightly burdened, bringing along merely three trunks of gowns, her personal maid Trancea, her beloved pet grejli, Opal, her trusted retainer, Elric, and a small chest which held the jewels which she had inherited from her mother.

But concealed among those jewels was a cleverly-designed container, made to look like a large sapphire, that contained a deadly poison! The distillation of venom from the oki snake of Pulej had cost her dearly, but the poison was tasteless and without color, and a single dose was guaranteed to be fatal.

Andrinara knew that her marriage to Crown Prince Alistair would not forestall the conquest of her beloved planet, Neridan, for long. Emperor Jakrung clearly intended to bring Neridan into his empire, and had simply chosen her marriage to his only surviving son as the most expedient method. But Andrinara would not give up her planet without a fight! Yes, she would go docilely to the altar, and yes, she would seem to perform her duties as a wife to the Crown Prince, but when the time was right...!

She had more than enough of the oki venom to dispose of two men. And as an Empress, she could protect not only her beloved Neridan, but all of the many other planets that had fallen under the despotic rule of the rapacious and cruel Jakrung of the House of Dorg.

Andrinara, Duchess of Neridan, was married to Crown Prince Alistair the next evening, just as the red sun of Riadorf touched the horizon. They stood together at the altar as the priest joined their hands with the ceremonial rope of golden threads, and said the appropriate words at the appropriate times, though neither spoke with a great deal of enthusiasm.

It was a solemn affair, this arranged marriage, and Emperor Jakrung seemed to be the only person present who took pleasure in it. Certainly Andrinara's retainer, Elric, was not happy. The poor man's eyes were heavy with despair, and the maid, Trancea, wept unashamedly.

Andrinara, for her part, was calm. She tuned out much of the ceremony, and used the time to study her soon-to-be husband, finding little fault with what she saw, though she tried. Crown Prince Alistair was tall and well-proportioned, with broad shoulders that tapered to narrow hips, and the outlines of his lean muscles were visible even through the heavy cloth of his ceremonial tunic. His eyes were a piercing blue, and his aquiline nose was set above full, sensuous lips. His golden hair curled slightly, and brushed the collar of his tunic, making a soft contrast to his firm jaw. Andrinara observed that the tawny skin of his hand made a pleasing contrast against her own pale fingers, bound to his now by the golden rope of matrimony.

The Crown Prince obviously took after his mother, a common woman who had been the Emperor's fourth wife, prized for her beauty even though her lineage was of no account. Jakrung himself, squat and as well-favored as a gargoyle, had little in common with his golden son, Andrinara thought. Despite herself, she felt a stirring of attraction to the handsome man who would be her husband.

Crown Prince Alistair felt something similar, if the hungry look in his eyes when Andrinara pushed back her triple veils was any indication. He clasped her hands warmly, and leaned forward to give his bride the customary kiss with an unexpected heat that made Andrinara blush. Emperor Jakrung chuckled at her discomfiture, and she pressed her lips together in annoyance before remembering the role she must play.

Dipping her head shyly, she looked up at her new husband through the screen of her dark, curling lashes, blinking her violet eyes flirtatiously. She must seem to be an empty-headed woman, a happy new bride, no one worth paying any real attention to. Until the time was right.

But first, she would have to get through her wedding night.

CHAPTER TWO

HOW can I do it?" demanded Alistair as he strode around the bridal chamber, leaving the hairs of his malkor stallion, Noble, scattered over the shequa rug.

"You must," said his man-at-arms and closest friend since childhood, Hotario. "You must keep your father's trust."

Alastair slumped into a chair dotted with priceless juki gems and took a sip of sweet frello, brushing back his golden curls. "I know," he sighed. "Or else I can never inherit the throne and undo in a single moment my father's notorious cruelties and institute the sweeping reforms that will make this Empire a haven for truth and justice."

If Alastair had dared to mutter such a sentence to anyone other than Hotario, his life would have been instantly forfeit, like those of all his brothers and sisters, who had plotted against their father the Emperor - but Hotario knew all the secrets of his heart (and body, closeness between men being permitted in the yearly hunt for the great *spayswurms*) and would never betray his prince.

Alistair rotated the frello goblet in his sensitive, yet masculine fingers, gazing despairingly at the bridal bed. "But oh, how I had hoped to find a woman of my own heart, brave and daring, compassionate and clear-headed. Not this bashful ninny of a child-bride!"

"Sire, she is no child," Hotario interjected firmly. "The Duchess is a woman grown, of years nearly but not quite matching your own, and if you are to keep up the pretence that protects you from your father's wrath, you must at least counterfeit lust for her curvy, yet not overfleshed figure and winsome face."

"Her body is not the problem," Alistair said grimly. "Ah, well, Hotario, take my kljer boots. If I must keep up the dishonourable façade of being a lothario and a rake, at the very least, I can give the Duchess a sweet wedding

night. But hark, the way you speak of my bride, I might think you wanted to woo her yourself!”

“Not I, sire,” said Hotario, looking bashfully out from under his thick black hair. “I have a weakness for small blonde women, as well you know.”

“Ahaha!” Alistair laughed in amusement. “Such as my new wife’s maid! No, do not blush, Hotario, my friend. I wish you every happiness.” He sighed in sudden melancholy. “For at least one of us will then be happy.”

“Courage, sire,” Hotario encouraged, and removed the Crown Prince’s boots. “Your father cannot live forever.”

“I pray to the Gods Helko and Proet that he does not!” Alistair exclaimed, and drew the curtains over the window where hung the triple moons of Riadorf like midnight-blue, pinkish-purple and silvery-grey gems in the sky.

“*Asgo*, Sire!” Hotario said fervently in the ancient language of the Riadorfian commoners, and embraced his beloved Prince. “But hark! I hear the ceremonial wuuly bells.”

“My bride approaches!” the golden prince cried. “Good night, Hotario.”

“Good night, sweet prince,” Hotario replied, and left to take his position outside the chamber door.

Alistair stood as his bride entered – though in order to protect his rakish pretence, he should have stayed draped languidly over his heavy chair. But the beauty of the young Duchess brought him to his feet, and Alistair could at least console himself that his greeting, “My lady, you are as beautiful as the triple moons that make Riadorf’s night a galactic wonder,” was not a lie.

Dressed in layers of white gauze sewn over with juki gems, her violet eyes flashing some emotion, the Duchess dipped her raven-tressed head. “You flatter me, my husband,” she murmured in her sweet voice.

Alistair hesitated, for he had seen that feeling, and could not decide whether it was hatred or interest that sparked in her eyes. But the face she turned up to him was smooth and mild, as bland as that of a lopre ewe.

“Will you have some frello?” he inquired.

“As my husband desires,” she said meekly, and he cursed his father in the darkest recesses of his heart as he poured. For a moment he had thought – but no!

“Call me Alistair,” he said as he gave her the goblet, and was pleased by her obvious surprise.

“I am called Andrinara,” she said, and after a long moment where her red lips pursed like a rosebud in consideration. “But my friends call me Andi... Alistair.”

With an effort, Alistair recalled himself. “Then I shall call you Andrinara,” he declared, with a roguish wink. “For men and women can be friends in only one place, my proud beauty.”

Andrinara’s head turned apprehensively to the wedding bed, but without a word she slipped free of her concealing robes. Alistair felt his head spin as she stood before him in all her feminine perfection. It required less will than he had feared to grasp her in his arms and press upon her a deep kiss.

Her lips opened to his like a flower opening to drink the spring rain, and he watered her well. When he pulled away, startled by the feeling in his chest, her violet eyes were sparkling. “Alistair, you are still clothed,” she murmured coquettishly, and began to undo the fastenings of his tunic.

In no time at all, it seemed to Alistair, they lay unclothed on the enormous round bed among the satin pillows. As he kissed the delicate flower at the centre of her virtue, she cried out to him in a voice that contained a passion he felt was belied by her meek demeanor, but this was a mystery swiftly driven from his mind as she grasped his throbbing manhood in her small hand and guided him into her warm and silky womanly jewel.

Never had Alistair felt such all-encompassing glory as when Andrinara’s violet eyes stared up into his piercing blue ones! This was almost, he thought, a woman he could love!

CHAPTER THREE

Since she had learned that she must make this hated marriage of necessity, Andrinara had dreaded the wedding night, certain that it would leave her cold and unmoved. She, who had dreamed from her first trembling steps into womanhood of a man who would take her in his arms and awaken the passions of her heart.

Her heart seemed safe enough in Alistair's careless grip, but the passions of her *body*...! Never in a thousand turnings of Neridan around its gentle sun could she have imagined the pleasures that Alistair made her feel. Under his attentions, she felt herself parting and opening like the thick and lustrous petals of a kalishi bud. She was not resigned, but eager – eager! – to receive Alistair's manhood into her center. And when he began to move above her, the muscles of his strong arms flexing to support him as he tangled his imperial fingers in her silky hair, she cried out with the sensation.

Alistair guided her deftly in the sweet bed-dance until Andrinara could take no more pleasure, raising her hips urgently in an unspoken plea for the release her body craved. When it came, they peaked together, voices entwining in a mirror of their bodies.

But almost as soon as their lovemaking was over, Alistair disentangled his limbs from those of his bride, and turned away, sprawling across the sheets in slumber. Andrinara sat up, and studied her husband's naked body as he slept, admiring the form which had taken her to such heights. His face was very peaceful in sleep, she thought. He did not look at all cruel, or as though he could be anything like his brutish father.

Andrinara knew better. This man had given her pleasure, and she was thankful for it! It had made her sacrifice easier than she had feared it would be. But the ravenous empire to which he was heir must be stopped. She could allow herself no tender feelings where Alistair was concerned.

The first weeks of Andrinara's marriage passed in a deliberately boring docility. She performed her duties as the Crown Prince's wife adequately, but not exceptionally. She played at shyness and obedience, holding back the rebellious words that formed on the tip of her tongue and contenting herself with thoughts alone, lowering her keen violet eyes to the floor whenever she was tempted to abandon her façade.

She saw very little of Alistair, which suited her. She filled her days with tedious public appearances at which she made banal little speeches about her happiness in her new situation. The Emperor was pleased, for sending an unimportant but lovely member of the imperial family to public events was an excellent way to boost the morale of the common people at little cost in effort to himself.

When Andrinara was not engaged in viewing yet another parade or graciously receiving yet another delegation to the palace on Riadorf, she occupied herself in apparent busywork with her maid, embroidering and painting and performing other inoffensive feminine crafts as her retainer, Elric, read ancient novels (of which Andrinara was genuinely fond) to them.

In fact, when they were not observed by some member of Jakrung's staff, the three natives of Neridan were quietly plotting his downfall, biding their time for the opportunity to strike!

Andrinara rarely met her husband outside the bedroom, and even inside it their meetings were strangely impersonal. The passion of their first night together seemed to have evaporated with the dawn. Alistair still coaxed pleasure from between Andrinara's willingly parted legs, and if his moans and gasps were any indication, he was not displeased with her own attentions, but it was a meeting of bodies only. Pleasant enough, and Andrinara found it easy to play her wifely role, but she did not again feel the urge to watch her husband sleep.

She was surprised, therefore, when Alistair suddenly turned to her after their lovemaking one night, instead of going directly to sleep, and asked if she would like to accompany him on a ride the next morning.

“I’m sure we can find a malkor in the imperial stables suitable for a lady to ride,” he said. “A mare, or perhaps a calm gelding.”

Andrinara’s eyes flashed with a sudden surge of temper. “I assure you, I am perfectly able to ride even the most virile male!”

Her husband chuckled, touching her intimately in a way that made her breath catch in her throat. “Well I know it, my dear,” he said, grinning roguishly, “but I was speaking of malkors.”

Andrinara blushed hotly and looked away. “If you promise you will not tease me so,” she said, “I will ride with you, yes.”

They rode out into the clear morning attended by Elric and two of the Crown Prince’s men-at-arms, taking a leisurely pace and enjoying the bracing fall air. Though Elric frowned at her warningly for showing so much will, Andrinara had insisted upon being given a spirited mount. Astride the prancing, caramel-colored malkor, remembering the long rides she had enjoyed with her parents when she was young, Andrinara felt truly happy for the first time since she had come to Riadorf. She gave the mare her head, laughing delightedly as Alistair paced her, mounted on his great stallion, and the two of them locked eyes for a moment, Alistair’s face showing a sudden, intense interest, before Andrinara remembered her role and demurely dropped her gaze.

It was as she was thus distracted that the *spayswurm* struck!

CHAPTER FOUR

FOR a moment, Alistair had thought himself happy as he held the gaze of the laughing woman who was his wife, and then the air was filled with the sounds of screaming malkors.

All was confusion and chaos as the *spayswurm* dove, its gaping jaws filled with sharp teeth made of the precious invulnerabilium that armored the warships of the Dorgian Imperial Navy! Before Alistair could do more than unsheathe his zathwop blade-arm, the hideous beast had pierced one of his men-at-arms with its wicked fangs – not, thank Proet, Hotario, but another man – and devoured him whole.

The malkors were terrified by this, their ancient foe. Even well-trained Noble reared, and Alistair was forced to drop his blade-arm in the fight to keep seated. Alarmed, he twisted, expecting to see Andrinara fallen, trampled, or worse, but she kept her seat with admirable vigor and grace, her small face determined.

“To the caves, my lord!” Hotario cried, and pointed desperately to the cliffs at the end of the valley. But the movement undid him! His malkor bolted, and Hotario was flung clear, the sickening crack audible as he hit the valley floor.

“No!” Alastair cried in anguish, still fighting with Noble’s reigns, as the *spayswurm* stooped over Hotario’s crumpled form. “Take me!”

“Hyah!” he heard from behind, and the *spayswurm* shrieked as it was suddenly outlined in the bluish-yellow aura of a well-aimed zathwop shot. Riding like a fierce Gurepp warrior, Andrinara shot past him and stole Hotario from under the *spayswurm*’s nose, the smoking blade-arm that her retainer had carried still in one delicate hand.

“Andi!” her retainer howled, but Alistair could take no more. Swinging from Noble’s back and then back on in a single dangerous movement that an acrobat would have deemed impossible, he caught up his own fallen blade-arm

and aimed it at the *spayswurm* that threatened his dearest friend... and his bride. She ducked low over the mane of her racing steed as he shot, and he thought he saw, not fear, but exhilaration in her beautiful face as she streamed past him, Hotario unceremoniously slung over the back of her saddle.

Alistair's shot was true, and the *spayswurm* screamed again, but he did not wait to see if it had been driven away. Instead he rode, as if all the *ajaki* of Qwerty were behind him, making for the safety of the caves, and the woman he had thought meek and dull.

* * *

"It is fine, my prince," Hotario gasped, as Alistair tended his broken leg tenderly.

"It certainly is not," Alistair scolded. "You have a comminuted fracture in your left ulna." He pointed at his dear friend's bruising thigh. "Right there."

"It stings a little," Hotario protested. "But I believe I can still walk!"

"You are to rest, and give the poultice I have cunningly fashioned out of these cave mosses an opportunity to do its healthsome work," Alistair said firmly.

Out of the corner of his eye he noted that Andrinara was glancing at him as she spoke with her scowling retainer. They spoke quietly, but again with a passion Alistair had thought as alien to his princess as the sun-dwelling *Horittri* were to humankind.

"Will you rest also?" Hotario asked slyly.

Alistair came to himself with a start! He had been staring for some moments. "Ahhh," he sighed. "She is a mystery of a minx! For these past weeks I have been bemused by her bothersome boringness! Yet today she was daring, brave, clear-headed...."

"She saved me, sire. And I am grateful."

"And I also, friend Hotario," Alistair said, manly tears prickling in his eyes as he squeezed the brunet's shoulder. "I too, am grateful! Without you, this wearisome life—"

“Sire!” Hotario said urgently. “You know I would not stifle your powerful heart and your affirmations of our mutual devotion for anything other than the most vital need to keep the true nobility of your spirit concealed! Your bride approaches, and I beg that you be silent!”

Alistair turned, and saw Andrinara standing directly behind him, looking puzzled. For a moment he feared she had overheard him, but she merely blinked her black-edged eyes at him and murmured, “Alistair, shall we search for water?”

Alistair stood. “Of course!” he said heartily. “Why, further amongst these caves, we should find some underground stream!”

“You are clever,” she said in tones of surprise, and looked curiously at the poultice adorning Hotario’s leg. “That is... I mean...”

“Let us go,” Alistair said manfully, seizing her hand and drawing her away before she could divine how deeply he loved his friend and how intelligent a man he was, for such would be his undoing if she reported thusly to his father.

As they searched for water, however, he could not help but engage her in conversation.

“So you really can ride a malkor,” he said. “I perhaps should have expected it! What other pastimes do you enjoy?”

“Embroidery, of course,” she said promptly, then, hesitantly, “And I enjoy ancient novels, of the Earth people.”

“Really?” Alistair exclaimed. “They are a particular passion with me also! Tell me, have you read the Earth author, Heinlein?”

“That is quite the understatement,” she replied. “I think I own more books by Heinlein than by any other single author. I love Heinlein to bits and he’s probably the author who a young Andi imprinted on the most strongly.”

Alistair laughed. “It may be due in part to him that I believe I ought to be able to build a house with my bare hands and survive a nuclear holocaust; it’s certainly his

fault that I tried to learn how to work a slide-rule,” he admitted.

Andrinara’s nose crinkled in amusement. “That said, Heinlein has problems,” she pointed out, with far more authority than he had seen her use when speaking on any subject. “Problems with ethnocentrism, problems with women, problems with race, problems with sexuality and gender... I acknowledge that for his period, he was no worse than most and better than many, but all the same, there are bits of Heinlein that make me wince.”

“Have you read *Have Spacesuit, Will Travel?*” Alistair asked. “In that he has one of his least problematic female heroines: young Peewee (Patricia) Reisfield is the spunky, one might almost say ‘scrappy,’ child genius who drags slightly more sensible Kip (Clifford) Russel across the galaxy.”

“Oh, indeed,” Andrinara agreed. “Heinlein clearly *likes* women; just as clearly, he regards them as completely foreign creatures whose motivations and thoughts may only be dimly guessed at by men.”

“And in that, perhaps, he is not entirely wrong,” Alistair mused, fighting desperately with the blossoming love in his heart. “Andrinara... Andi...”

“Alistair?” she asked, her delicate face suddenly wary.

“Oh, Proet take me!” he declared despairingly, and kissed her tender mouth.

CHAPTER FIVE

Andrinara was caught unawares by Alistair's sudden passion, and was surprised even more by her own heated response. She clutched at his arms, pressing her lips to his as their tongues danced together. Who was this man, her husband? He had seemed to be no more than he appeared, a man of little action and less thought, and yet...!

Or was she only deceiving herself because of her desire for his body? At that moment, she neither knew nor cared.

"Lie with me," she gasped, bosom heaving. "Here. Now."

"Yes," Alistair moaned. "Oh, by the triple moons, yes!"

They sank together to the floor of the cavern, pushing clothing aside with urgent fingers. Soon their bodies were joined, seeking together toward ecstasy. Andrinara felt the stones beneath her bruising her hips, but as Alistair's thighs moved slickly against her own, the small pain was drowned beneath her mounting pleasure.

"Alistair!" she cried out, at the moment of her release.

"Andi," he crooned. "Andi..."

They held each gently for a time afterwards, quiet and still. Alistair shifted in her arms, and Andrinara loosened her grip, expecting him to pull away. Instead, he nuzzled at her breasts, open-mouthed, laving the rosy tips. Andrinara felt the quivering of his manhood as it rose again.

"They'll wonder where we are," she gasped. "They'll think..."

Alistair lifted his head, smiling in a way that was not at all roguish. "Let them wonder. Let them think. We do nothing wrong, here. Are you not my wife?"

"Yes," Andrinara moaned, as he entered her again. "I am your wife."

“Oh, Elric, Trancea” Andrinara said, the next day. “I am so confused!”

After Andrinara and Alistair had traveled to the heavens and back together once more, they had located some water, as well as some edible plants growing in the cavern, and had returned to their companions to wait for rescue. It was not long in coming, for the Emperor jealously guarded the safety of his only remaining heir, and a party of guardsmen went out in search of the riders when they had not returned to the palace by evening.

The third of the triple moons rose into the sky as they approached the palace, and Andrinara reined in her mount for a moment, captivated by the sight.

“They are beautiful, are they not?” Alistair murmured, close to her ear.

“Very,” she replied. “The jade-green moon of Neridan has always seemed to me to be surpassingly lovely, but this... It is difficult to decide which night sky moves me more.”

“I would like to see Neridan’s sky, someday, and make the comparison with you,” Alistair said. Andrinara was surprised by the longing in his voice, and turned to look at him. Abruptly, his face assumed its usual bland, rather foolish mask, and he spurred his mount on toward the stables without another word.

“What confuses you, my lady?” Trancea asked.

Andrinara shook her head, clearing her mind of memories of the night before. “I thought that it would be easy to do what must be done,” she admitted. “But now I am not so certain. Alistair...”

Elric frowned. “The Crown Prince will inherit the empire,” he pointed out. “Neridan cannot be safe so long as the House of Dorg persists.”

Andrinara stroked Opal, her pet grejli, with distracted fingers. “It just seems... I wonder if we might have misjudged him.”

“What is there to misjudge?” Elric snorted. “There is little enough to the man.”

“Do we know that, truly? At times, he has seemed different. Passionate.”

“He certainly has a reputation for *passion*,” Elric grated. He turned away to hide the pain in his face. If only things had been otherwise, perhaps one day he might have been able to confess to his beloved Duchess his own passion! But no. They all had their duties.

Andrinara’s hand stilled on Opal’s fur. “What do you mean?”

“He’s had many mistresses, my lady,” Trancea put in. “Many lovers. Everyone speaks of it. Even his friend, Hotario.”

“Had?” Andrinara said, suddenly stricken. “Or *has*?” Her servants were silent.

“Tell me!” Andrinara insisted.

“There are rumors...” Elric muttered, just as Trancea said, “People do say...”

“But he stays with me all night!” Andrinara exclaimed. “We are only apart during the day!”

“When you are away, my lady, he often goes into the city,” Trancea said, gently. “He has an apartment there, in a tower near the spaceport. They say that he keeps a mistress there.”

“Who says this?” Andrinara demanded.

“Everyone,” Trancea said.

“My lady...” Elric hesitated. “I have seen her. I followed him, one day, and saw that he met with a woman, and they entered the building together. She is... Well, she is quite beautiful.”

Andrinara took a deep breath before speaking again. She felt strangely faint. “I must have been mistaken about him. I thought there was something... Never mind.”

“Shall we discuss the plan some more, my lady?” Elric gently asked, after a little while.

“Yes,” Andrinara said. Her voice was firm with purpose again. “Let us review it once more.”

But before the three Neridian conspirators had even begun to consider putting their desperate plan into action, the matter was taken out of their hands! Mere days after the fateful malkor ride, the Emperor was discovered dead. Within the day, the news had spread through all the inhabitants of the palace – the Emperor had been assassinated!

Though they should have been relieved, the first step in their plan taken care of by another, the Neridians felt only the stirrings of anxiety. The oki venom from Pulej would have been subtle. A knife in the heart, a delicate knife with a handle of Neridian jade, seemingly made for a lady's hand, was not!

The guardsmen came for Andrinara before the day was out. They carried cuffs of invulnerabilium with them, but Andrinara tossed her raven hair, violet eyes flashing, and refused to be chained.

“Surely you do not imagine that I am truly a threat!” she said.

The guardsmen lowered their eyes in shame. When Andrinara walked between them to the royal dungeons, she held her head high, looking like an Empress instead of a prisoner.

Behind her, she left loyal Elric and steadfast Trancea with tears in their eyes, but determined to do all they could to free their beloved ruler!

CHAPTER SIX

The palace was in an uproar as all prepared for the funeral of the Emperor Jakrung and the coronation of Crown Prince Alistair. And yet, Alistair still found time to confide to his dear friend on the horrid quandary that gripped his soul.

“I thought she liked me,” Alistair moaned, “And yet she has deceived me and now I must announce her doom! My father’s ministers are fervent on the point and will not be denied, and until my coronation (which will not take place for a further three days, as the full triple moons rise) I do not have the authority to resist their machinations!”

Hotario watched his prince pace, his noble brow creased with manly concern. “Is it truly the death of your father that you mourn, sire?”

“Certainly not, Hotario. My father was a monster. Only the unbreakable vows of paternal loyalty I swore before the very gods prevented me from taking his wretched life these many years past. It is Andi... Andrinara that I mourn!” He slumped into a chair and raised his wrist to his forehead in a pose that spoke eloquently yet silently of his heartbreak. “Do you think it possible she could be innocent?”

“The knife’s hilt was Neridian jade, sire, and fit for a woman’s hand. I inspected it myself. And yet...” Here Hotario hesitated, while a warm pink glow stole across his marble skin. “And yet, Trancea insists her mistress is not guilty, and with such earnest distress that I find it difficult to disbelieve her.”

“But who else could possibly kill my father with a knife with a handle of Neridian jade fit for a woman’s hand?” Alistair demanded. “Logic itself will not allow me hope, however I wish to compel it! I must condemn her!”

Hotario considered this. “I cannot reconcile it,” he admitted. “But perhaps Bettiana could?”

Alistair sprang to his feet. “Yes! Bettiana! Secret leader of the rebel forces who await only my coronation to subdue the reactionary forces of my late father’s Empire! I shall

visit her in the apartment where I am wont to consult with her, protected by the ruse that she is my mistress, though I had never touched a woman before my marriage to Andi. Oh, Andi! Perhaps I may save you yet!”

Accordingly, Alistair took to his ruby-red flightcar and sped through the airways of New Riadorf, while traffic scattered in the advance of this scion of the House of Dorg. Despite the pretence that had protected him, many of the commoners knew of the Emperor-Elect’s true loyalties, and discreet cheers followed the stupendous machine (Alistair drove, if possible, even better than he rode).

Bettiana was waiting for him, her rich, dark skin set off by a robe of midnight-purple, and juki bracelets hung about her slender wrists. Her black eyes were deeper than wells, and filled with sympathy instead of water, as she heard the prince’s tale.

“The evidence is hard, sire,” she said. “But, consider. Is it possible that some foul ruffian wishes you to *believe* that the Princess is guilty? And, to further this end, used a weapon that would indicate her royal person as the assassin?”

“I do not comprehend,” Alistair said, frowning mightily, but as Bettiana further illustrated her point, his face gradually cleared until he shone like the red sun of Riadorf, only less red.

“Oh, wise Bettiana! You give me hope indeed! How happy I am! But how – HOW?” he asked, sinking into deepest gloom once more, “- may I resist the urgings of my father’s ministers to have her executed?”

“Why, it is simplicity itself, sire!” Bettiana exclaimed. “You need only wait until the very moment you are crowned! Then your authority is complete. As Emperor, you may release the princess, arrest your father’s minions, discover the true identity of your father’s killer and immediately institute the new Golden Age for the people of the Dorgian Empire (of which we have spoken often).”

“Bettiana! Paragon! Savior!” Alistair cried, sweeping the dignified woman into his arms and dancing around the room with her. “You are my best counselor, this day and all

days, and were you not slightly older than me and common besides, I swear I would have requested your hand in matrimony these many months past.”

“There, sire,” Bettiana said tolerantly, patting his golden curls. “You know I think of you as a younger brother who is more noble than I am. What could be more natural than my requiring your presence at my apartment every day in order to consult with you on a plan which has been finalized for years?”

“Nothing at all,” Alistair declared, and kissed her cheek.

“And now, dear Bettiana, I leave you, to write to my Andrinara and reassure her that she must only wait these three days before she may join me at my side.”

Back at the palace, and some hours later, Alistair finished the composition of his letter of devotion and assurance, and handed it to Hotario. “There,” he said, satisfied. ‘Please give this to either the Princess herself, or one of her two retainers, if they attend her in her confinement, as I permitted them to do.’”

“At once, sire!” Hotario declared, and left his prince’s chamber as Alistair gazed out upon the waxing moons, dreaming of the day when he would be reunited with his passionate bride.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The dungeons in which Andrinara languished were dark and dank, after the manner of dungeons the universe over. But the gloomy surroundings, stinking of the insidious klepor moss which grew in all the dark, dank places of Riadorf, were lightened somehow by her serene beauty as she calmly sat, pondering her fate. As was customary for children of royalty on her home planet of Neridan, Andrinara had of course been tutored extensively in a variety of subjects, including intergalactic law. She had been admitted to the planetary bar of Neridan at the tender age of fifteen, and was widely known on her home planet as a lawyer of exceptional brilliance and keen knowledge of legal precedents. If all else failed, Andrinara knew that she could always attempt to argue her way out of an execution.

But before she had finished mentally composing her closing arguments, the former Duchess of Neridan and current Princess of Riadorf heard the voice of her faithful retainer, Elric, commanding her attention in an urgent whisper. But the voice emanated not from the barred doorway of her dungeon cell, but from the stones beneath her feet...!

“My lady,” Elric breathlessly declared, “I have found an escape route out of this dungeon! If you will only stand aside a moment, I can lift this flooring stone, and you can join me in this ventilation shaft, whence we can crawl our way to freedom!”

“But why should there be a ventilation shaft beneath a dungeon which is itself in the very bowels of the imperial palace?” Andrinara mused.

She could not see Elric’s answering shrug, but she could hear it in his voice as he replied, “it hardly matters, my lady. Let us make good use of it, regardless of its provenance!”

“You are quite right, of course, faithful Elric!” Andrinara obediently stood aside, and soon the flooring

stone was removed, and the way cleared for her to enter the mysterious ventilation shaft. It was clearly of more recent construction than the stone-floored, drafty dungeon, being a sturdy tube of belidnium, a light but strong metal produced on the jungle world of Fe'e'e'at, lit at intervals by blue-tinged glow-bulbs. Though it was narrow enough to necessitate crawling, Andrinara felt that her knees pressed against the belidnium surface in surprising comfort, and she was certain that she could crawl along the ventilation shaft for hours if need be.

Indeed, Andrinara and her faithful retainer crawled for a lengthy space of time, finding no safe egress, until they eventually perceived that they had somehow traveled from below the dungeon to far, far above it.

"This is entirely illogical," Andrinara muttered, peevishly. "We've crawled all this time – there was no apparent incline in the shaft, and we've climbed no ladders. How can we now be above the palace kitchens?"

For indeed their position above those very kitchens was unmistakable. The scents of roasting qillef meat wafted up to them, along with the savory odor of the pelfff-spiced cream soup which was the official planetary dish of Riadorf, and served at every meal.

"I can account for it no more readily than you yourself, my lady," Elric replied. "But nevertheless, we must continue onwards. It is not safe to linger here, where we might so easily be discovered."

Elric's advice, as always, was eminently sound, and Andrinara put aside the questions of physics which so plagued her and, keen violet eyes searching out the way ahead, continued along the ventilation shaft.

Some time after they had left the kitchen smells behind them, Andrinara paused abruptly once more. Not because she detected an odor, but because she heard a most familiar voice...! She perceived that they were now above the private chamber of her husband, the soon-to-be-Emperor Alistair.

"Now there is only one thing left to do," he said. There was no answer, and Andrinara understood that he was

speaking his thoughts aloud to himself alone. “I must first take on the role of Emperor, through the ceremony of my coronation, and then, *then* I shall be able to deal properly with my wife, and bring my father’s murderer to account!”

If only Andrinara and Elric had not tarried above the kitchens...! They might have heard Alistair speaking with his trusted companion, Hotario, and understood the true depth of his attachment to Andrinara.

But, alas, it was not to be thus. “How could he think it of me?” Andrinara cried, when she and her faithful retainer were a safe distance further along the ventilation shaft, and could not be overheard. “I had thought he might care for me a little, despite his perfidious, licentious ways! But no, for he believes me to be guilty of murder!”

She wept crystalline tears from her sparkling violet eyes, conveniently ignoring the reality that she had very much intended to do the very murder of which she was now wrongly accused. Elric longed to offer her comfort, but it was difficult to do much more than cast his eyes sympathetically towards her within the cramped ventilation shaft.

At length, Andrinara wiped the tears from her face with the purple, satiny fabric of her sleeves. “Dear, faithful Elric,” she intoned. “I believe our duty is now clear. For a little time, I had thought that Alistair might be of a different kind than his father, but I am now certain that Neridan can never be free under his rule. We must continue with our original plan, and end the threat of the House of Dorg once and for all! Only, I fear...”

Andrinara would have swooned, had she not been already nearly supine in a ventilation shaft. Her face flushed, instead, with the intensity of her emotions, visible to Elric even in the dim light of the glow-bulbs.

Decorously, he averted his eyes from his lady’s distress.

“I fear,” she said again, once she had mastered herself, “that I may not be able to carry out my self-appointed task with the necessary firm resolve.”

“Ah, my lady,” the ever-faithful Elric replied, “you can count upon me.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

But did you give her the note?” Alistair demanded when Hotario brought him the news of Andrinara’s escape and disappearance.

“I gave it to her maid, my liege. The Princess, I did not see.”

“But her people remain here?”

“Yes, the retainer Elric and Trancea remain,” Hotario replied.

“Then I cannot think she would abandon them!” Alistair declared. “I cannot blame Andrinara for escaping – she must have feared for her life, without knowing that I would sooner die than allow a single raven lock of her hair to be harmed. But following the ceremony, I will declare her innocence, and she will, I am sure, return to me!”

Alistair’s coronation was a dull and lengthy affair, and only the presence of Hotario at his side, and Bettiana (disguised in the role of a priestess of Proet) and the knowledge of the freedom he was about to bring his people could have compelled him to suffer the long ceremony with grace. He waited through the ceremonial splashing of the waters of Gwrh, the ceremonial flight of the glittering awerogs, the ceremonial sacrifice of the pink-and-silver Trewq, and though all the omens were good, every second was as eternity to him until he could ensure Andrinara’s safety.

Finally, as the triple moons rose in all their glory, he could make his announcement!

But before he could speak he spotted the retainer Elric struggling with the guards at the entrance to the juki-speckled throne room.

“Let the man speak!” he cried, and motioned Elric forward.

“I come to plead for my lady,” Elric said roughly, his face twisting with grief.

“Of course, noble Elric!” Alistair declared, springing to his feet and waving the guards away, thrilled to be the

bearer of good news to this tormented man. “Your lady has been much on my mind! Indeed, as Emperor of the Dorgian Empire, I am delighted – nay, overjoyed! overcome with happiness! – to declare that your lady, my wife, the former Duchess of Neridan and the Empress of the Dorgian Empire, is–”

“Enough!” Elric shouted, and as Alistair recoiled in amazement from this unaccustomed and unmannerly interruption, he saw the retainer pull from a hidden pocket a deadly gerfred, doctored with yellow-green likpri poison!

“For Andrinara and Neridan!” Elric declared, and thrust the needle-sharp gerfred at Alistair’s very heart!

But Alistair was a wise as well as a comely youth, and beneath his ornate garments he wore a corselet of invulnerabilium! Trusty Elric’s blade broke, and he cursed, drawing back for another stroke, this time at Alistair’s unprotected throat.

Bettiana shrieked!

“My liege!” Hotario cried, flinging himself between the men. To his utmost horror, Alistair witnessed Elric’s blade plunge deep into Hotario’s side!

Cursing again, Elric once more drew back his blade, and Alistair looked into the twisted face of death, resolving to die with his head held high until the very moment that it should be struck from his body in a welter of blood!

“Noooooooooooo!” shrieked two feminine voices, and Andrinara and Trancea came running through the throng. Alistair perceived, through his tears of anguish, that Andrinara clutched the holo-letter he had sent her in her pale and dainty hand.

“Elric!” she expostulated. “Alistair is innocent of the crimes to which we assigned him! He is honest, brave and true, and meant to declare my innocence! This holo-letter – which Trancea gave me mere moments ago – explains it all!”

She thrust it into Elric’s hands while Trancea, bosom heaving with hysterical breaths, swooned over Hotario’s bleeding body.

“What have I done?” Elric demanded in horror, as he read the holo-letter and then dropped to his knees beside Hotario’s pale and sweating form. “Oh, may all the Gods punish me! I thought that this woman you name Bettiana was your mistress!”

“Mistress!” Bettiana exclaimed. “Why, no! I am a common woman, and would not marry a noble such as the Emperor, nor dally with a Crown Prince. Indeed, I must admit that my romantic aspirations have always been set on a man of about my years of twenty-eight, tall, dark and loyal, perhaps in service to some royal scion.”

“Hark!” Alistair cried, for his superb hearing had caught the sound of a much-loved voice beneath the din. “Hotario speaks!”

“My liege,” Hotario whispered. “I am grieved to leave you, and my darling Trancea and her noble mistress, and wise Bettiana, and this good man, who killed me with the noblest of intentions... but I cannot resist the likpri poison much longer.”

“Good Hotario,” Alistair choked, taking his hand. “If only I had some rare and expensive oki venom! Although in all other cases it is deadly poison, my expertise as an herbalist and chemist assures me that in this case, it would be your salvation! But alas, I have none.”

“Oki venom?” Andrinara questioned, her violet eyes flashing. “Why, I have some right here!” And from her bosom, which Alistair had lately caressed with such attention, she withdrew a container cleverly designed to look like a large sapphire!

“We must administer it!” Alistair cried, and swiftly poured the venom down his friend’s throat.

Breathlessly, they watched as color returned to Hotario’s cheeks, and, miraculously, he sat to embrace the wakening Trancea!

“Oh, Andi!” declared Alistair.

“Oh, Alistair!” exclaimed Andi.

“Oh, Trancea!” cried Hotario.

“Oh, Hotario!” whispered Trancea.

“Oh, Bettiana!” swooned Elric.

“Oh, Elric,” sighed Bettiana.

And under the triple moons of Riadorf, as the cries of freedom went forth across the galaxy, the couples kissed in true and tender love, united – at last!

Fin

The Ballad of Gragner and the Spayswurm

Brave Gragner rode out one bright day
Under the deep red sun
The mighty *spayswurm* for to slay
So a maid might be won.

The maiden fair he loved so dear
Tho' her father did frown
And the two wept many a tear
Their feelings were cast down.

But Gragner knew that if he killed
The dread *spayswurm* unarm'd
The maiden's father would be thrilled!
By the feat he'd be charmed.

For to slay the *spayswurm* was hard
Not just anyone'd try
Many men were horribly scarred
And other men did die.

If it would win his lady's hand
Gragner'd do anything
So he set off into the land
His fortune home to bring.

He traveled for many a day
And also many nights
He wondered if he'd gone astray
No *spayswurm* came to bite.

Then at last the monster did come!
The *spayswurm* came at last!
To his fear Gragner did succumb
He started running fast!

But then he remember'd his quest!

And he turned back to fight!
The mighty *spayswurm* he would best!
He'd best the *spayswurm*'s might!

He strove with it for hours and hours
But it was mightier
The *spayswurm* kills and then devours
Of them, 'twas bitier.

So sad Gragner met his sad end.
Ev'ryone was so sad
That the *spayswurm* did rend
Flesh and bone from the likely lad.

But none so sad as his maiden
Un-won and so so sad
Sorrow on her back was laden
And she was *really* sad.

She died pretty soon after that.
It is a tragic song!
But now the heavens they are at
Together, as they b'long.

Bettiana's Secret

Eric, former retainer to Andrinara Zuera Francel III and current landowner, was inspecting his grounds one day when he heard the dulcet tones of two ladies in conversation. Aware that his wife, the lovely Bettiana, was entertaining the aforementioned lady for whom he had once so loyally retained, he started to turn away, not wanting to intrude upon their private conversation. But, alas, before he could remove himself from earshot, he overheard a few words in his beloved wife's voice, and his attention was ensnared!

"No, Elric doesn't know," the former freedom-fighter murmured. "I don't know how he'll react when he finds out!"

Next, Elric heard his former employer's familiar voice. "You'll have to tell him sometime, Bettiana. You can't keep it from him forever!"

"I know," Bettiana sighed. And then, speaking more loudly, "do you hear something?"

Clapping his hands over his mouth to stifle the gasp that he had inadvertently admitted, Elric backed quickly away from the scene of the ladies' tête-à-tête, too shaken by what he had overheard to risk discovery and an immediate confrontation.

What could they have been speaking of? A hundred horrible notions flooded his mind! Perhaps his wife was no longer happy in their marriage! Perhaps she wanted a separation! Perhaps... she had taken a lover!

But no, he could not believe these things of his beloved Bettiana, the truest and noblest (though in actuality common, and not of noble blood at all) of women!

And yet...

What *could* they have been speaking of?

For the next several days, Elric paid attentions to his wife the like of which he had not engaged in since the

earliest days of their marriage. Tenderly, he clasped her hand when they walked in the gardens together. Sweetly, he read to her after dinner from their latest holo-novel. Passionately, he kissed her – but every time he tried to embrace his Bettiana, or hinted at the lovemaking which they usually so enjoyed together, she pulled away, making one excuse or another and quickly engaging in some other, less amorous activity.

Elric could not help worrying.

Over and over he replayed the snippet of overheard conversation in his mind, trying to eke out any possible shred of meaning. What horrible secret was his wife hiding from him? What could she possibly have to tell that she feared his reaction to? *What could it be?*

Finally, the tension came to a head one morning over breakfast.

“Elric,” Bettiana announced, in the tone of voice of a woman who has steeled herself to do a task long put off and is about to tell her husband something that she is not sure how he will react to, “I have something to tell you, and I want you to brace yourself, because I’m not sure how you will react to it.”

Now that the moment had come at last, Elric would give anything to postpone the dread news, whatever it might be, a little further!

“Wait, my dearest wife,” he exclaimed. “Let us become comfortable before you tell me whatever it is. We shall repair to our sitting room, and the soft, overstuffed couches which your friend the Emperor Alistair was so kind as to purchase for us as an anniversary present. Seated upon these commodious accommodations, we will be truly ready to share whatever news it is that you have to impart in full!”

“As you wish, my husband,” Bettiana whispered.

Elric detected a nervous trembling in his beloved wife’s voice, and it sent a thrill of terror straight to his staunch heart. With heavy steps, he led the way to their humble, yet tastefully appointed sitting room, where he and his wife sat on the couches that had been provided by their Emperor,

and proceeded to look with the greatest of interest at their shoes.

At last, Bettiana could stand the silence no more. She took a deep breath! “Elric,” she said, her voice as firm as she could make it, “It is time to tell you!”

Elric clenched his jaw, bracing himself for the very worst!

“We are going to have a baby!” Bettiana cried, without further ceremony.

At first, Elric could not quite comprehend what his wife had said. So ready to hear some awful news, so prepared for calamity, he was utterly upset by her revelation.

“Oh, thank Proet!” he said. “It’s only *that!* I thought it would be something... momentous!”

Elric spent the night on one of the gift-from-the-Emperor couches.

Villanelle of the Moons

Midnight-blue, purplish-pink and silver-grey,
The moons of Riadorf hang in the sky
After the red sun sets at end of day.

My love, my dearest, won't you with me stay
In the moonlight, with me abide by,
Midnight-blue, purplish-pink and silver-grey!

Your kisses are wine of unique bouquet,
Your lips sweeter than the finest of pie
After the red sun sets at end of day.

We'll let our passions carry us away
Under the moons and stars so very high,
Midnight-blue, purplish-pink and silver-grey...

If desire was a sword, you could me slay,
With evr'y deep-lashed glance and limpid sigh,
After the red sun sets at end of day!

My darling, I love you more than cliché!
Now together, in the night let us fly
Midnight-blue, purplish-pink and silver-grey,
After the red sun sets at end of day.

*Between the
Rings
of Lambda*

CHAPTER ONE

CROWN Prince Xantony of the Dorgian Empire watched in agony as his dearest love and his best friend danced in each other's arms at their wedding feast. Zamanda, only daughter of the steadfast Elric and the brilliant Bettiana, was radiant in her wedding costume, and Xantony was truly happy for her despite the pain in his chest. But the groom, Jandrew... In Xantony's eyes, the handsome young man, son of his father's closest friend, Hotario, outshone the bride.

Those silver eyes were clouded briefly by a single crystalline tear, which Xantony dashed away with an impatient gesture of his imperial hand. Jandrew had chosen Zamanda, and Xantony, who loved them both well – though differently – wished them the best. But to stay and watch them as they began their new life together would be an unbearable torment! And so, as the wedding guests celebrated, Xantony took one last, lingering, longing look at Jandrew's handsome visage, then turned his back, squared his shoulders and strode purposefully into the night!

Elric and Bettiana's estate – given to them by Xantony's parents, Alistair and Andrinara, as a wedding gift, which they graciously accepted though Bettiana firmly (but gently) refused a noble title to accompany it, preferring instead to remain as one of the common people of Riadorf in whose interest she had fought against Alistair's father, the late Emperor Jakrung, for nearly half her life – was several kilo-miles from the nearest spaceport. But Xantony, thanks to the rigorous physical training that all princes of the Dorgian Empire were required to undergo throughout their adolescence, was a strong walker, and he reached the spaceport before the third moon had disappeared below the horizon, just as the first reddish rays of dawn were kissing the soil of Riadorf.

Xantony turned his silver-colored eyes upon the ships docked in port, standing at ease with his hands tucked into the pockets of his *spayswurm*-leather trousers, his raven hair blowing in the gentle breeze, and considered his options. There were several bright little vessels at rest in the port, sleek and fast, but Xantony's attention was captured by a much larger, less flashy craft. The ship bore the romantic name "Starswimmer" in faded purple paint on its dull gray hull, but it was far too large and ungainly to bring any sort of swimming to mind. It was clearly a long-range interstellar ship: perfect for Xantony's purposes.

Of course, it wouldn't do to book passage. As soon as his parents realized that Xantony was missing, a search of the records of every spaceport on Riadorf would be conducted, and if Xantony were to buy a fare, he'd be followed and retrieved almost at once. The Crown Prince of the Dorgian Empire would not be allowed to simply disappear from court – but to remain, to see Jandrew every day, and know him to be a married man...

Becoming a stowaway was the only option.

In the end, getting aboard the *Starswimmer* without attracting anyone's attention was simple enough. It was a large ship with a small crew, and all Xantony had to do was wait until everyone was busy enough that he could slip aboard and hide himself behind some crates.

Staying hidden once aboard was more difficult. After takeoff, only the crew quarters and essential areas of the ship had life-support, and Xantony was forced out of the cargo hold and into the populated sectors of the ship. Remembering a story that his mother used to tell, he attempted to squeeze into a ventilation shaft, but found that his masculine physique was ill-suited for the enterprise – his shoulders were simply too broad.

And so the silver-eyed Prince was forced to skulk about the oft-traveled corridors, ducking into unoccupied rooms whenever he encountered them and trying desperately to

stay out of sight. It was his intention to leave the *Starswimmer* as anonymously as he had come aboard, once the ship reached its final destination, wherever that might be. But his life as a stowaway was so plagued with difficulty that he feared he would not meet with success.

First, there was the issue of food. Xantony had brought a half-dozen micro-rations along with him, but this supply of sustenance was soon exhausted. He was able to steal a small quantity of food from the crew cafeteria, but he dared not take too much lest the theft be discovered and wondered at. By the end of his first week about the *Starswimmer*, Xantony was very hungry indeed.

His discomfort was made more acute by exhaustion. He slept little, and lightly, fearing that he would be stumbled upon by a crew member while dozing. The handsome Prince was soon reduced to a wan, disheveled mess of a man with shadowed eyes and a hungry look. Had he but known it, it was an excellent disguise. Certainly none of the crew of the *Starswimmer* would connect the wretched stowaway with the Crown Prince of the Dorgian Empire, even with his unusual silver eyes!

Indeed, when he was finally discovered, Xantony was taken not for a prince fleeing heartbreak, but for a beggar fleeing debts!

He had succumbed to a deep sleep at last, and at once his fears of being found were realized. The Captain of the *Starswimmer*, once alerted to the presence of the stowaway, was kinder to his unanticipated guest than Xantony would have expected. Though he was told that he would be handed over to the authorities as soon as the *Starswimmer* touched down planetside again, the incognito Prince was taken in the meantime to the ship's medical station and given over to the care of the Chief Science Officer, who also served as Ship's Doctor.

"I'm going to give you intravenous fluids," the tall, dark-skinned brunette said. "I'm afraid you're terribly dehydrated. My name is Chairite, by the way – what shall I call you?"

Xantony's unusual silver eyes widened – he had not planned for this! “Call me... I mean... My name is... Ynotnax!” he blurted.

It was at that very moment that the *Starswimmer* was rocked by a sudden impact!

“Strange,” Chairite murmured. “We’re not near any asteroid fields.”

The Captain's face appeared on the med station's view screen. “Shipwide alert!” he bellowed. “We’re under attack!”

CHAPTER TWO

Francoque Gallo, second-in-command of the *Red Raptor*, turned his eyes, as deep a green as the oceans of Triton 24, to the trim form of his dashing and extravagant sister, Mica'elle, Pirate Chief of Lambda.

"The gautier communications phasers have been fratulated, Captain!" he announced.

"Excellent," Mica'elle declared. "Launch the invado-pods!"

As he rushed to comply, the thrill of a boarding rushing through his piratical veins, Mica'elle slapped his shoulder with a hearty sibling affection that set her coppery hair flying. Brother and sister, in addition to sharing the same birthday, had the same uncanny black streak through their fiery hair that announced them as inheritors of the famed Gallo telempathy. Francoque felt his sister's love and responded, but was unable to conceal his inner sadness!

"Cheer up, Frannie," Mica'elle whispered as they strapped themselves into their invado-pod recliner chaircom. "In addition to the frenulum crystals which we can deliver to our beleaguered and desperately poor allies in Sector Sigma Mu Oh Seven, perhaps we will find a companion worthy of you!"

"Perhaps," Francoque replied heavily, for he, like the stars, was lonely in his beauty. "Or for you, dear sibling!"

"Bah!" Mica'elle scorned, black eyes flashing like the strobe tentacles of the Qwertian hoverbull. "With a bucking spaceship deck beneath my feet and a holo-wheel in my hands, what need have I of love?"

"Aye!" Francoque agreed, reading the magnograpple. "And yet..."

"And yet," Mica'elle replied with a gay laugh, and swung through the hole the magnograpple had cut in the hull of the *Starswimmer*. On all sides the fearless crew of the *Red Raptor* streamed past them, each intent upon their mission of mercy.

"What do you sense, womb-mate?"

Ignoring this affectionate pet name, Francoque extended his exquisite and nebulous sixth sense to the limits of his stupendous brain. He trembled as his searching mind made contact.

“The frenulum crystals are concealed in the medbay!”

“Then let us go!” Mica’elle proclaimed.

And laughing, the two siblings ran unerringly through the corridors of the merchant ship while the *Red Raptor* crew peacefully subdued the crew of the *Starswimmer*.

Francoque made short work of the medlab’s sonic lock with his perfectly pitched singing voice, and Mica’elle shouldered the door open. Of course, the crystals were nowhere in sight – no merchant would risk the open exposure of the galaxy’s most precious substance, equal only to the invulnerabilium fangs of the great *spayswurm* in its value to interstellar trade and war!

“Where are the frenulum crystals?” Mica’elle demanded of the solid and sensible Chief Science Officer, whose surpassingly beautiful blonde hair was bound up in a restrictive bun.

The woman peered through her thick glasses. “I am Chief Science Officer Chairite of the *Starswimmer*, Merchant Class ship of the Dorgian Empire,” she replied flatly, but her voice trembled as she added. “The Imperial Navy will catch you, you rapacious thieves!”

“Sister!” Francoque cried in alarm, for his telepathic powers had alerted him to the presence of another person in the room.

Indeed, even as he spoke a slim but muscular figure launched itself from under the medcouch and hurtled at Mica’elle!

At once, Francoque leaped to his sister’s unprotected back and wrestled with her assailant! He found himself staring into the startling silver eyes of a young man with raven black hair and finely-wrought features that seemed tantalizingly familiar, yet unrecognizable.

The man was obviously trained in the traditional Riadorfan martial art of Boot Sway, but Francoque’s greater experience proved victorious. Flushing, he pinned

the Science Officer's attractive would-be savior to the medcouch.

"Ynotnax!" Chairite cried.

"Madam," Mica'elle said, unsheathing her lumino-epée with a flourish. "Reveal the frenulum crystals, or I shall regretfully slash the throat of this frail – yet handsome – young man!"

Francoque concealed his sudden unease with a roguish smirk. Well he knew that Mica'elle would never harm a civilian (for in hundreds of raids, the Gallo twins had never once killed the undeserving, or allowed their gallant crew to harm the innocent, regardless of the provocation) and yet his heart trembled within him at the thought of Ynotnax's blood spilling from the ivory skin, or his beautiful silver eyes closing forever.

Officer Chairite stood still for one agonizing moment, but her eyes betrayed her conflict. With a sigh, she waved her hand over a wall panel that smoothly slid back, revealing the precious crystals swathed in raw xarbenian silk.

"But it won't do you any good!" she declared. "Until they are installed, the crystals will lose all efficacy when more than one light-mile from the person to whom they are genespondically bonded!"

Mica'elle started. "I can feel that she speaks the truth," she said lowly.

"I concur," Francoque agreed, trying to ignore the sinuous sensuality of Ynotnax's struggles to free himself from Francoque's steely grip.

"But who? Who? Wait, I have it! It must be one of these two! Only the Chief Science Officer and her assistant could possibly possess the scientific acuity necessary to calibrate the spondimeter!"

"Brother mine, you are brilliant!" Mica'elle exclaimed. "Come, my proud beauty!"

In no time at all, the twins and their captives were aboard the *Red Raptor*, along with the rest of the pirate crew.

“Shall we achieve warp celerity, Captain?” the Chief Driver asked respectfully as a Dorgian battleship hove into view. Ynotnax made a short, piercing cry, abruptly cut off, at the sight.

“Yes!” Mica’elle commanded. “Make it happen!”

CHAPTER THREE

“*Captured* by pirates!” Chairite wailed, once she and Xantony had been locked in the *Red Raptor*’s brig. “What shall we do?”

Xantony put his arm around the petite woman and ruffled her close-cropped auburn hair in a hearty and comforting gesture, though in truth he was as worried as she. He had done his best to fight off his attacker, the pirate Francoque, but though Xantony had struggled manfully, Francoque’s arms had closed about him like a vice, subduing him with overwhelming force.

Yet, even as he was striving to escape, Xantony could not help being distracted by the closeness of Francoque’s body. He had felt the man’s heat close behind him all the way as he and Chairite were taken aboard the *Red Raptor*. Xantony had once thought that no one but Jandrew could make him feel... But no! He must not think such things!

“We must be canny, friend Chairite,” he said decisively. “We are outnumbered and overwhelmed by superior force, but we have something the pirates do not.”

The Science Officer blinked her cerulean eyes, deep in thought.

“Why, of course!” she exclaimed. “The pirates do not yet know to whom the frenulum crystals are genespondically bonded! Perhaps we can use this information as a bargaining chip.”

“And if we can hold out against the tortures they are no doubt soon to inflict upon us,” Xantony added, “we may be able to seize a chance to escape.”

Chairite’s pretty brow furrowed in worry. “Do you really think they will try to torture the information out of us, Ynotnax?”

Xantony’s face was grim. “I am quite certain.”

“But what will they do? They cannot risk killing either of us, or even shedding much blood – the genespondic bond can be so easily disrupted, and then the frenulum crystals will be quite worthless!”

Xantony gave the Science Officer's shoulders a bracing squeeze.

"They may try to starve the information out of us," he mused. "Or perhaps they will take a more direct approach. I hear that many piratical vessels are equipped with whipping posts so that the captains may discipline their unruly crew at need."

"Whipping!" Chairite's pale green eyes widened in horror. "Surely not!"

"I'm afraid we must be ready for anything, dear Chairite," Xantony opined. "But together, perhaps we can be strong enough to face it!"

The two friends – for fast friends they now were, despite the fact that Chairite did not yet know Xantony's true identity, or even that the name he had given her, Ynotnax, was a false one, for true friendship will always be forged in the face of kidnapping and eventual torture, even if the persons involved are traveling under false names – lapsed into silence for a time, after that, each of them imagining the discomforts that doubtless would soon be visited upon them.

For his part, Xantony hoped for the whipping. He was sure that he could bear a beating better than further deprivation of the necessities of life, even if the hand that wielded the whip should be that of the strong and strangely attractive pirate, Francoque. Perhaps *especially* if... But no! It was only his recently-broken heart that made him subject to such thoughts, Xantony was sure, and he was determined to think them no more.

Meanwhile, voluptuous Chairite was picturing the lovely face of the dashing pirate leader, Mica'elle. Never before had she seen such fierce beauty, and yet Mica'elle had named *her* beautiful. Could such a woman truly be a heartless rogue? The Chief Science Officer feared that yes, she could, and could not quite account for her feelings of disappointment at the idea.

But the fears of brave Xantony and Chairite were not soon realized. Though they firmed their jaws with steady determination when they heard the sound of footsteps

approaching, they were not dragged from their cell to undergo the imagined torture. Instead, they were invited to dine with Captain Mica'elle and her brother, Francoque!

The stalwart friends were led forth from the brig and through the corridors of the *Red Raptor* to an opulent suite, carpeted in a lush crimson and populated with graceful ulka-wood furniture. Their hosts rose from a low couch by the door and came to greet them as they entered.

“Thank you for joining us tonight,” Mica'elle said, extending her hand to slender Chairite.

When the Science Officer obligingly though bemusedly offered up her own hand, Mica'elle seized it quickly and pressed Chairite's fingers to her lips.

Francoque laughed heartily at the sight of the Science Officer's sudden blush and clapped Xantony on the shoulder in masculine camaraderie. The warm imprint of his hand lingered for several moments against Xantony's skin, and the young Prince smiled foolishly despite his firm intention to remain aloof and inscrutable.

“Are you going to torture us now?” he demanded, abruptly, determined not to fall for the pirates' tricks, whatever they might be.

“Torture you? Proet, no!” Francoque seemed genuinely surprised at the question.

“Unless, of course,” Mica'elle husked, giving Chairite a sly wink, “you *want* us to...”

Francoque smiled fondly at his irrepressible sister. “But first, in any case, there is a fine dinner to be eaten! Please, friends, allow us to escort you to the table.”

The four of them were soon seated around the ulka-wood table, which was handsomely set with clean and freshly-pressed linen cloths and dishes of the finest translucent *plastique*. The meal was simple but elegant and rich: an ergulliiian stew with fresh rororo bread, a salad of freeg leaves and sweet purple franthan tomatoes, and a light green wine, sparkling with pale violet bubbles.

Xantony and Chairite were wary of speaking too much and inadvertently giving away the secret of the genespondic bond, but the pirate leader and her brother seemed to be

interested only in discussing a holo-book of poetry that they had recently perused together.

Xantony did not find their explication of the poetry calming, and the young Prince's frame was wound tight with tension by the end of the meal. Though the words sent a new spike of fear through his soul, he nearly wept with relief when, at last, Francoque pushed aside the dessert – a light frudulan pudding – and said, “and now, let us proceed to the *real* aim of this evening's invitation!”

CHAPTER FOUR

Chairite's brown face froze in fear, and her short black braids shivered violently as she backed away from the table, but she spoke valiantly.

"No matter what you do to us, we shall not reveal the secret!"

"Do to you?" Francoque asked sadly. "Oh, my dear science officer – nay, Chairite, may I call you so? – I had hoped that you could see past the fearsome reputation of the Lambda Piracy to our vital mission."

He dared, then, to turn to the man who called himself Ynotnax. "Do you still believe we would harm you?"

The silver eyes of the younger man trembled with unease. "I would like to believe you would not," he whispered huskily. "And yet... and yet... those crystals! What other *real* aim could you have?"

Mica'elle smirked, but laughingly waved away Francoque's glare.

"Fair Chairite," she said, smoothly bowing, "Would you accompany me on a brief tour around the deck? If you give me your word against sabotage, I will grant your parole... and I am sure more palatable accommodations can be found for you than the brig."

Francoque permitted himself a small smile at Chairite's blush, but truly, he had never seen his sister so besotted with a woman. Mica'elle might pretend a rakish air, but the secrets of her heart were open to his telempathy, and he could perceive her true affection for the brilliant and brave Dorgian woman!

And as for his own feelings... ah, as for them!

The black-haired man did not protest as Mica'elle and Chairite left. Indeed, he took a step closer to Francoque, his breath coming more quickly. "And your 'real aim?'" he asked quietly, platinum orbs roaming up and down Francoque's well-formed figure.

Francoque smiled as he felt the other man's interest. Turning, he placed a small holo-box on the table and

pressed a button. The other man's eyes widened with interest, and he stepped closer still! The box expanded to reveal a set of gwegian Go-Chess, a fiendishly difficult game far beyond the abilities of the rough but charming crew of the *Red Raptor*. Francoque, though, was a Galactic champion – under an assumed name of course, since he had to compete in tournaments in a variety of cunning disguises.

“You do play?” Francoque said softly, “Your Highness?”

Crown Prince Xantony blushed most becomingly, it seemed! “How did you know?” he asked.

“When I was but a boy, the bravery of your parents and their sweeping new reforms that transformed the Dorgian Empire gave me freedom! My sister and I were freed from the gualogarian mines of Jurgjor (alas not before that vile torment had claimed the lives of our parents, uncles, aunts, and nine of our fourteen cousins) and were given a fresh start in the widening galaxy! Ever since that momentous day I have eagerly followed the royal newswebs,” Francoque explained. “Of course, once given a chance, I recognized your splendid imperial bearing and famed visual appendages!”

“If you were freed, then how can you plague the Empire now?” the young man demanded, though the stain on his cheeks showed him not immune to Francoque's honest appreciation of his manly charms.

“I admire the royal family,” Francoque declared. “But remnants of the old Empire remain!”

“My father will not ransom me,” Xantony protested. “And besides-” and he sighed heavily “– I cannot return! My very soul is anguished.”

“Then we shall play for your freedom,” Francoque offered. “I shall set you free on whatever system you desire.”

This last, the pirate said, barely concealing how much it would grieve him to do so, but he quickly reassured himself that such a calamity would not take place. For he had a plan! A plan that required cheating!

“And if you win?” Xantony asked boldly.

Francoque smiled. "We shall discuss that... later."

As the game progressed through the lottery of uno chips, the placement of sorry hotels and the gradual acquisition of Miss Scarlets, Francoque used his telepathic talents to gauge the success of his opponent. For Xantony, a passionate and honest soul, could not conceal his inner joy every time he received a good hand of ludo cards, and Francoque played accordingly.

And as he played, he toyed with his scarlet xarbenian scarf and his black tricorne leather boots, noting with interest how Xantony evidenced *other* feelings!

In the end, after long hours, Xantony threw his last chip into the box. "I concede!" he declared, in true admiration.

Francoque could take it no more! Sweeping away the chess pieces and the remnants of their meal, the pirate seized the younger man and began to devour the silver-eyed man's mouth, plunging his wily tongue into that welcoming crevice!

The black-haired man did not struggle, glad hands roving over the copper-tressed man's back and unfastening his space trousers.

"Oh, Francoque," the prince moaned, thrusting delicate hands over the bare flesh so exposed.

The older man gasped as imperial fingers drifted towards his stiffening scepter of manlove. Unbidden, his telepathy went wild, psychic pleasure bands tightening around the royal man's mind, exploding into golden showers of ecstasy!

"Ah, Proet!" cried the young man whose name began with X. "What have you done to me! Jandrew!"

"Jandrew?" the non-royal asked sharply, bringing himself under control and removing his psychic power from the other man's mind. The raven-headed man stared up at him, and then thrust himself away.

"What did you - Forgive me!" he pleaded. "I-"

And then he turned and fled, leaving the desolate Francoque amidst the scattered game pieces, aware that he had soul-bonded himself to a man who, it seemed, desired another!

CHAPTER FIVE

Xantony fled blindly down the corridors of the *Red Raptor*, his silver eyes clouded with tears of confusion. What had happened between himself and Francoque? Was his love for Jandrew, that love that had seemed so true, so undying, such a transient thing, in the end? How could he think of any other man? And yet, how could he think of *Jandrew* while touching Francoque so intimately?

His frenzied thoughts were interrupted by a stabbing pain in his gut, which felt as though someone was thrusting a knife into his innards.

“Aaaaaugh!” he cried, falling gracefully to his knees.

Xantony’s cries of agony quickly brought racing footsteps, and Mica’elle and Chairite were soon with him.

“What’s wrong, Ynotnax?” Chairite asked worriedly. “As a Science Officer, I can see that you look as though you have a stabbing pain in your gut!”

Mica’elle gasped! “A stabbing pain in the gut, you say? Proet forbid it!”

“Oooohhh...aarrghhh...” Xantony moaned. “Uuuuughhhhh...”

Chairite’s violet eyes were wide behind her stylish glasses. “Do you recognize his ailment, Mica’elle? Whatever could be the matter with him?”

The pirate leader clasped Chairite’s hand tenderly in her own, her brow furrowed with the creases of a lovely young woman who is about to impart bad news to another lovely young woman and also a young man in terrible pain who may or may not be able to comprehend what she is saying because his agony is so great.

“I fear, dearest Chairite,” Mica’elle intoned, “that he is suffering from an unrequited soul-bond.”

“An unrequited soul-bond! How can it be cured?”

“First, we must bring him into the close proximity of whoever initiated the bond,” Mica’elle stated with authority. “That will help to lessen the pain.”

Chairite ran her slender hands through her hair, throwing the golden curls into wild disarray. “But how can we know who that is?”

Mica’elle pressed her lips together firmly in the gesture of a sister worrying about her brother. “On all the *Red Raptor*, only two persons are capable of initiating a soul-bond. Myself, and... my brother!”

Chairite gasped!

“Obviously, my dearest one, I did not do it,” Mica’elle reasoned. “I have been alone in your company these many hours past!”

“Which means...”

“Yes,” the pirate leader agreed, nodding firmly. “We must take Ynotnax to Francoque!”

Between the two of them, the women were easily able to lift and carry the Prince, for though Mica’elle was slender of form, she had a pirate leader’s invulnerabilium-like strength, and Chairite, as a Chief Science Officer, was used to wrangling large and weighty pieces of equipment, such as the hyper-scope and her diagnostic holo-table. Once they had the moaning Xantony cradled in their arms, the women quickly proceeded down the hallway toward the suite in which they had lately finished their meal.

Upon entering, they found the room in total disarray! The accoutrements and pieces and accessories for a set of gwegian Go-Chess were strewn about the room, along with the remains of their meal! But most distressing was that Mica’elle’s brother, Francoque, lay upon the floor, writhing with stabbing pains of his own! It was a sight horrible to behold, and Chairite, ordinarily so staunch in the face of discomfort and injury, as a Chief Science Officer who also served as a medic for a ship the size of the *Starswimmer* was required to be, was distressed so deeply by the agony of the two men that she covered her eyes in horror, loosing her hold on Xantony abruptly. Mica’elle, surprised and overbalanced by the sudden shift in weight, lost her grip as well, and Xantony tumbled from her arms to roll across the crimson carpet towards Francoque.

And as suddenly as it had begun, the agony that beset Xantony and Francoque was ended, as their hands tenderly touched!

“Oh, Francoque, what is happening to me?” Xantony cried, in a voice raw and husky from moaning.

Diplomatically, Mica’elle took Chairite’s hand and led the taller woman away from the suite, leaving the two men in private.

“I am so sorry, my prince!” Francoque exclaimed. “I did not realize what I was doing, else I never would have proceeded... I did not think a soul-bond could come upon one unawares! I have made love to many men, and even a few women, but never before have I felt such an attachment, such a longing for closeness beyond the merely physical as I felt with you. I am afraid that I was quite overwhelmed.”

Xantony blushed manfully. “I felt... something, as well,” he admitted shyly. “But I don’t understand – what is this soul-bond of which you speak?”

Francoque sighed gustily. “It is part of the special gift of the telepaths,” the pirate leader’s brother explained. “We are free to love many with our bodies, but we can only give ourselves truly, body, heart and mind to one, our soul-bonded life mate. When we feel true unity with another, we can initiate the bonding process, which will ensure an everlasting closeness, partly because it hurts really, really bad to be very far apart.”

“Sweet Proet!” Xantony cursed. “What have you done to us? Am I never again to travel more than several dozen micro-feet from you?”

For the first time, the red-haired Francoque smiled. “It is not so dire as that, Xantony. The distance at which separation remains comfortable can be expanded.”

“How?” the silver-eyed man demanded. “What must we do?”

“Only what we began so lately, dearest one,” Francoque explained. “Lie with me, share your body with me, and the bond will be strengthened such that we will be able to stand some time apart.”

The trapped and angry prince wished that he could refuse, but truly, he could not. Not only because he needed the freedom of some distance from Francoque, but because, even hurt, confused and angry, he still desired the other man with every fiber in his young body.

“Yes,” he said, his voice trembling with passion.
“Come to me.”

After that, they spoke no further words, though their tongues sang together as they dueled together, first within Xantony’s mouth, and then within Francoque’s. And as their tongues sang their fierce duet, their fingers played the instruments of one another’s bodies like deft virtuosos, passionately plucking notes of pleasure from each other’s skin.

Though Xantony was shy and inexperienced, Francoque quickly taught him how best to give pleasure with his hands and his mouth, first demonstrating upon his eager student and then allowing the younger man to practice his new skills upon his own urgently aroused manhood.

For some time – what seemed like hours to the young Xantony! – all was swirling of tongues and thrusting of hips accompanied by soft sighs and gasps and deep, manly moans.

When the prince and the pirate were sated at last, they slept, entwined together upon the plush carpet like two strands of hair in a long-haired maiden’s braid, briefly at peace.

CHAPTER SIX

Some weeks later, staring at the star-speckled sky as the ship prepared to dock between the rings of Lambda, Francoque let out a gusty sigh that spoke tenderly of the torment in his troubled bosom!

“And Chairite will wear a crown of cream kjolo flowers, the better to set off the waist-length glory of her silky black hair and appleblossom complexion,” Mica’elle finished, and tossed the final list at the ship’s Wedding Planner. “Frannie, please speak to me! It has been some weeks since I have seen you smile. Is young Xantony (for I know his true identify now, since you told me some time ago) a torment to you still?”

“Oh, dear sister, how I wish you happiness in your mate!” Francoque said, drawing his hand languidly across his pallid forehead. “For me, true love is nothing but a torture more agonizing than the long days we spent mining in the mines!”

“Do you feel the sudden stabbing pains in the gut?” Mica’elle questioned sharply. “Chairite, my love, find Xantony!”

“No!” Francoque called, halting the long-legged Science Officer as she ambled hastily towards the door iris.

“No, he comes to me at night, and each night is as an explosion of ecstasy greater than a gravity-bomb. But in the mornings he creeps away, to test the soul-bond that ties us in an inextricable confoundment!” At this, the pirate bowed his head. “I think... I fear... he loves another.”

“Why, it is simple!” Mica’elle exclaimed. “I need only kill this interloper, and then Xantony will be free to adore only you.”

“Are you mad?” Francoque gasped, clutching at his chest. “Xantony might then kill himself, and murder me also! Dear sister, you forget that to destroy one member of a soul-bond is to annihilate both!”

“I had forgotten!” Mica’elle exclaimed in self-reproach.

“Perhaps science could provide a solution?” Chairite offered. “Science has done so much, after all. Once I install these frenulum crystals in the tragically poor colony for which they are intended – for I have come fully to comprehend and share your piratical ideals, wherein you rage against the megasupercorps and their illegal price-hiking so that the poor must pay outrageous prices for the simplest of frenulum communication connections, even if they are engaged in activities as worthwhile as the arts and require the newsweb access for research and light entertainment once their heroic labors are for the day concluded – I shall bend all my efforts to a peaceful separation.”

“O!” Francoque exclaimed violently, and stormed away, his long red hair floating behind him on a mysterious breeze, the single strand of black like the stripe on a zebra if zebras were red and had only one stripe.

“I fear that Francoque does not wish to be separated from his soulbond mate,” Mica’elle opined.

“I fear it also,” Chairite agreed. “Come, my bride-to-be, let me cover you with kisses as sweet as the ice-cream flowers of High Gorgolia.”

“And I shall caress you as softly as the silky breezes of Alpha Four caress the migrating fhel-bulls,” Mica’elle whispered, and the two did it on the comdeck while the crew of the *Red Raptor* bashfully turned their eyes from the moving sight.

Francoque fled to the gaming deck, now deserted as the crew was fully occupied in docking. Or not fully deserted! For a single silver-eyed figure was staring at a gwerugian Go-Chess board, turning a single piece over and over in his slender fingers.

Francoque was about to announce his presence, when the young prince – for it was he! – let out a sigh. “Ah, me,” Xantony mused.

“He speaks,” Francoque whispered. “Should I speak too?”

“Oh, Francoque,” Xantony said, perfectly oblivious to the pirate’s presence. “If only you weren’t a Gallo! If you

were anything other than a pirate, I know our unity would be complete! But my father, Emperor Alistair, cannot approve of our alliance! And so I can only come to you at night to show you the secrets of my heart with my body, which is not nearly so magnificent as yours. But what *is* in a name? A geji blossom by any other name would infect you with love pollen as rapidly!”

At this Francoque nearly revealed himself, but leaning his cheek upon his hand, Xantony continued. Francoque listened in delighted but anguished silence, wishing only to be a glove on Xantony’s hand, so that he might touch his cheek! Perhaps a glove of Xorbonian gold, or Hexia durg hide.

“As for Jandrew, I can see now that my affection was only the youthful urges of youth. But he remains a convenient fiction to keep you from claiming me, your own, and having me betray my beloved family, so opposed to your own!”

“Then I shall change my name!” Francoque declared, springing boldly into the middle of the gaming deck and sweeping the Go-Chess pieces onto the floor – again!

“Francoque!” gasped Xantony, as startled as a mouse who is frightened when the pantry light is turned on suddenly in the night.

“Francoque no more! Since my name is offensive to you, I shall forswear it! From henceforth I shall be... Frank!” He tossed his hair and rested his hand on the hilt of his lumino-epee. Renouncing his name was truly anguish, yet not so much as not being able to love Xantony with all his being.

“Frank!” gasped Xantony. “It is so strange yet so melodious on my tongue. And yet... O, Frank, and yet-”

“Yes?” Frank encouraged, sweeping the younger man into his arms.

“I love you!” Xantony declared, and swooning in surrender, ravished the older pirate’s mouth with his own.

They came together like a storm, touching like lightning while their cries were like thunder and their intertwining strands of hair a cyclone of lust that drifted

across the gamedeck like a hurricane moving across the ocean... of love.

At last, when every desire of body and heart had been satiated, and Francoque had probed with his pink protuberance the very essence of his lover's pleasure tunnel, and received, in turn, his own tender spelunking into the cavern of joy, they fell, exhausted, into one of the game couches and tenderly stroked each other.

But suddenly! Just as the *Red Raptor* docked, defenseless! The mighty Dorgian Navy appeared!

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Sweet Proet, no!” Mica’elle exclaimed, hastily neatening her love-disheveled garments whilst staring at the approaching flagship of the Dorgian Navy on the holo-view-holo-screen on the comdeck. “It’s the flagship of the Dorgian Navy, and it’s approaching!”

Mere moments later, young Xantony heard for the second time in his tender life the sounds of a captain sounding a ship wide alert! But this time, he knew, he would not be captured by a mysterious yet stunningly attractive pirate who would initiate a soul-bond with him and thus teach him the true meaning of love. Instead, he would probably be returned to Riadorf, a much less appealing proposition!

“Alas, my love!” he declared. “What shall we do? I cannot bear to be parted from you, but if my family discovers me here, as seems inevitable, I shall be returned to Riadorf posthaste and forced to resume the duties of Crown Prince which I have so blithely shirked! But if you travel with me, no mere docking of a syllable or two from your name will preserve you, a man steeped in a life of piracy as in a very piratical tea, from the gallows! Whatever are we to do?”

Frank, meanwhile, was so distressed that he could not speak, and merely clasped his soul-bonded life mate to his manly bosom.

“If only I were a celebrated lawyer like my mother,” Xantony opined. “But perhaps your brave sister, who has her own talents, will be able to guide the *Red Raptor* through a skillful set of evasion maneuvers that will allow us to escape!”

“Yes!” Frank exclaimed. “I had forgotten for a moment, so great was my distress, which not only rendered me speechless but memoryless as well, that daring Mica’elle commands the rough piratical crew of this vessel largely because of her unblemished reputation as a pilot, which she has built up through a unique synthesis of traditional space-

flight training and clever application of predictive telempathy. If anyone can escape from the Dorgian Navy, it is she!”

“We should ascend to the comdeck and lend our support,” Xantony suggested.

Hand-in-hand, the two men ran together to the comdeck. When they arrived, they found that Mica’elle had already taken the helm, and was bending all of her formidable skill to the task of evading the Dorgian flagship. Faithful Chairite stood behind her, tense and ready to rush forward and offer support in the form of a soothing shoulder massage, so unconscious of her own comfort that she had not even noticed that the jewel-studded eye patch she wore over her missing right eye was askew and her bright purple hair had escaped from its customary French braid to fall in delicate tendrils about her face.

“Sister!” Frank exclaimed. “Xantony and I are here to lend you any assistance that we can!”

“I thank you, dear brother Francoque —” Mica’elle began, but she was abruptly interrupted by the brother to whom she was speaking.

“Actually, it’s Frank now,” he clarified.

“I thank you, dear brother Frank,” Mica’elle revised. “And most sincerely do I appreciate that you and your soul-bonded lover have come to support me as I perform feats of agility never before seen in this quadrangle of space! Watch out – I think this one may disrupt our auto-grav generator.”

Indeed, as the *Red Raptor* performed an improbable barrel-roll the auto-grav failed and all who were standing upon the comdeck were abruptly floating instead. Frank and Xantony, still linked by their clasped hands, drifted gently against one another in a way that would have been highly erotic if they had not been in immediate fear for their lives.

“We must remember to try this on purpose later,” the irrepressible Frank murmured in his true love’s ear. “If we survive.”

“I fear that the flagship still has a lock upon our position,” Chairite observed, hanging upside-down in front of the holo-view-holo-screen, her soft strawberry-blonde curls forming a halo in the weightless air around her. “I can see that the Dorgian Navy still approaches us at a steady speed, thanks to my perfect 20-20 vision. And, of course, my knowledge of science.”

“May Proet damn them all!” Mica’elle cursed. “Oops, here comes gravity again.”

Everyone thudded suddenly onto the deck again, as though they had been human-sized bags filled with material of an approximately human weight dropped from a small height onto the comdeck of a space ship.

With the horrible cry of a soul-bonded man in the deepest emotional pain, Xantony expressed his intention to speak.

“It’s no use, dear sister of my heart,” he explained. “We cannot outrun the Navy, though if anyone could do it, it would have been you – in this case, no one can. We must surrender ourselves. And perhaps if I identify myself immediately and plead for clemency for all of you, some of you may be spared.”

“It grieves my heart horribly to contemplate this thing,” Mica’elle mused. “Particularly since I suspect that my dear brother and I will not be among those who are spared, since I am the pirate captain, and he has served as my right-hand man. And, of course, if we die so will our soul-bonded loves, which is even more horrible to me. And yet... For the sake of my rough but generally honest and innocent of wrongdoing (aside from their predilection for piracy) crew, I think I must, indeed, surrender.”

With this sad pronouncement, the dashing pirate captain brought the Red Raptor to a stop, signaling meanwhile through the inter-ship comlink that she wished to parlay with the captain of the ship which attempted to detain them. Within moments, the holo-view-holo-screen’s display changed from the vastness of space to show the interior of the Dorgian Navy’s flagship, where Xantony was intensely startled and surprised to see not only the admiral of his

father's empire, but also that very father, as well as his mother and several of his siblings!

"Xantony!" his mother exclaimed joyously. "Thank goodness that you are alive!"

Her princely son took a deep breath, preparing to try to explain himself and his actions to his soon-to-be-intensely-disappointed parents.

"Wait, Xantony!" his dear friend, Chairite urged. The petite redhead with the freckles and sparkling green eyes placed her hand upon his shoulder in a staying gesture. "I think that perhaps this horrible conundrum can be solved with science!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

“What?” Frank cried. “Can science possibly pluck us from this perilous position?”

“I’m sure it can!” Chairite responded, the holo-cam installed in her left eyesocket rolling while her remaining steel-grey eye narrowed in her cyborg-crisp features. “If only they can be delayed for a few minutes... Xantony, speak to them! Stall them!” And with that she wrapped her pink-nailed hand around Mica’elle’s, and ran with her beloved from the room.

Xantony had not the least idea how this delay might be accomplished, for his parents were as swift to action as they were quick of thought, yet he squared his shoulders and stepped into view of the communications screen.

“My beloved parents,” he began, for indeed a sluice of affection poured through him, mixed with the tragic knowledge of his near-certain fate, suffused with the bubbles of hope, like a particularly fine champagne cocktail of emotion. “I-”

“Xantony!” cried Empress Andrinara Zuera Francel III, her violet eyes sparkling with unshed tears as she brushed the raven-black strands of her bob back from her exquisite face. “My dear son, how pleased I am that my womanly intuition correctly surmised your flight would be to the lawless Rings of Lambda!”

“And I!” added her husband, Emperor Alistair of the house of Dorg, patting his wife’s hand with a tender gesture that bespoke of their still luminous and legendary love, the first blossomings of which have been chronicled in the first stirring story of this collection, “am delighted that I could instantly order without quibble or consternation the Imperial Navy to follow my wife’s superior instincts regarding the potential whereabouts of our son, the Crown Prince and Heir to the Dorgian Empire, the happy result being your return to our joint parental bosom and the apprehension of these ruffians who have long plagued our merchant fleets.”

“And we!” cried his younger brothers Hollo, Frolo and Carol, the triplets, in perfect unison, as was their habit from the earliest stages of childhood when they had begun – precociously – to speak not only in standard Dorgian, but in a special language of their own, incomprehensible to the outsider, and often unintentionally but hurtfully exclusive of Xantony, who now wondered if the resulting loneliness might have led to his initial feelings for Jandrew, or indeed to his eventual flight from rather than shelter in the haven of his family, “are overjoyed that our royal parents permitted our accompaniment on this possibly dangerous mission, for, though if the Navy were somehow overwhelmed, such a disaster might leave the Dorgian Empire without adult heirs and thus plunge it into a civil war of succession such as that detailed in *Above the Mountains of Hrefldor*, we insisted on participating in your rescue and return!”

“As I was saying-” Xantony said, his heart quailing.

“I return!” Chairite gasped, leaping through the door, her cat-yellow eyes alight with joy. Behind her, effervescent Mica’elle walked with a look of uncommon solemnity, sober as a nun who had given up drinking. She held in her hands-

“-The frenulum crystals!” Frank exclaimed. “But surely not?” he added immediately after this exclamation.

Indeed, Xantony could see that the crystals in Mica’elle’s hands were the pale pink of crystals that were not genespondically bonded to anyone, not the hard and pulsing red of crystals prepared for installation. Moreover, there were dozens of them! It was a fortune beyond measure, and a miracle Chairite could not possibly have engineered... or so he thought!

Every woman and man of the *Red Raptor* crew eagerly applied to Chairite for the answer to this mystery, as did Xantony’s mother, father and siblings, and of course, the adoring but puzzled Frank, who caressed Xantony in full view of the comscreen and thus inadvertently revealed the depth of their connection!

But as royals, Xantony's parents were able to put aside their curiosity about the pirate who had stolen their son's heart to seek out the answer!

"Your Majesties," Chairite said with a respectful nod of her bearded chin, once the din had been quieted. "It appears that soul-bonding, which is the special gift of the telepaths and those with whom they mate, is a more developed form of genespondic bonding! It is very simple. I blush that I did not think of it before, especially since science clearly proves that both terms include bonding! By making tender, yet passionate, love in the presence of frenulum crystals, soul-bonded pairs can bring about the creation of new crystals, a romantic and scientifically pleasing proof of their affection! Like babies, in a way."

"By Proet!" Xantony declared. "Mother, Father, does not the value of these crystals alone not adequately recompense the Empire for the purely commercial damages wrought by the Gallo twins and their rough but good-hearted crew?"

"A compelling legal argument!" Empress Andrinara approved.

"And by creating more crystals, we – by which I mean my one true love Frank–"

"Actually, if there's no need for concealment, I shall go back to Francoque," Francoque mentioned.

"- my one true love Francoque, together with his delightful sister and the brilliant Chairite – could solve the Empire's communication problems and undercut the grasping hands of the supermegacorps, without need for further piracy."

"Ah! Such wisdom!" agreed Mica'elle.

"It is clear that you have grown up and grown well, my son," said Emperor Alistair, brushing a single manly tear from his high cheekbone. "I hereby grant the Gallo twins and all who serve them amnesty. Let the bells ring out!"

"Oh, Alistair!" chirped Andrinara.

"Oh, Andrinara!" agreed Alistair.

"Oh, Chairite!" chuckled Mica'elle.

"Oh, Mica'elle!" gasped Chairite.

“Oh, Xantony!” swooned Francoque.
“Oh, Francoque!” aspirated Xantony.
And the couples embraced in passionate joy as the word
spread between the rings of Lambda!

Fin

*Transcript of Q&A Session with Claire Rasmussen
and Belle Heartley at the 5th Anniversary
Gathering of Dergian Fen*

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR IDEAS?

CR: Oh, lots of places! I personally find a lot of inspiration in the ancient love ballads of medieval times.

BH: The Universe is my Muse. I feel it whisper to me on the long nights that infuse me with Wonder.

THE SCIENCE IN YOUR NOVELS IS ALWAYS SO INTERESTING! DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELVES SCIENTISTS?

CR: I've never really studied it seriously, but yes, I think I'd call myself a scientist.

BH: I am an Artist. But I feel a deep sympathy for Scientists who are ignored and oppressed by a world that does not recognize the beauty and startling originality of their ideas.

CR: Oh, Belle! You're always so thoughtful.

THE MEN IN YOUR NOVELS ARE ALWAYS SO CONVINCING! DO YOU DO A LOT OF, YOU KNOW, RESEARCH?

CR: What?

BH: Certainly – by Living life, I have encountered many men. However briefly, each encounter impacts my Muse, and when I channel the characters in the transcendent experience of writing, they live as real men.

CR: I don't think I really understand the question. Sorry!

DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE CHARACTER IN THE DORGIAN CYCLE?

BH: I identify most closely with the tormented Francoque, who feels so Deeply and suffers so much in pursuit of Love.

CR: I don't know about a favorite... They're all so wonderful! I think I've always felt particularly close to Andrinara Zuera Francel III, though. I think if we met we'd be great friends – we have a lot in common!

DO YOU HAVE A RESPONSE TO THE RUMORS ABOUT PLAGIARISM IN THE DORGIAN CYCLE THAT HAVE BEEN CIRCULATING ON THE INTERNET?

BH: I was unable to write for a full week when these horrible lies were brought to my attention by loyal fans! I implore all those who Desire more wondrous Dorgian fiction to express themselves to the rumor-mongers in no Uncertain terms.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUNG AUTHORS WHO WANT TO FOLLOW IN YOUR FOOTSTEPS?

CR: I think the important thing is that they need to realize that it's not as easy as it looks to write stories with as much pathos and depth as the Dorgian Cycle! It takes a lot of hard work, and hours and hours of research and poring over the thesaurus at the local library to really get something worth publishing.

BH: I would advise them to cast off the Shackles of the Industry tyrants. Some know-nothings will recommend Agents. As if anyone could better represent or understand the work than the authors! And Editorial Constraint is a vile relic of a fascistic Past. Writers must be Free.

THERE'S A RUMOR THAT THERE WILL SOON BE A SEQUEL TO THE TRIPLETS TRILOGY! IS IT TRUE?

BH: After the youngest triplets Hollo the Valiant and Grier the Quadruple-Crowned Seer of Joul were wed in the third book, we do mention that his brother and her sister attend the wedding in a Delicate state. So I think we can say at This point that a sequel is not out of the Question.

CR: I'm so attached to those characters, almost like they were my own children! I'd love to spend some more time with them.

WHAT ABOUT THE RUMOR THAT THERE'S GOING TO BE AN AMONG THE WEREPIGS OF HORTICULT MOVIE?

BH: Hahaha! What a charming Rumor! The Werepigs are of special interest to me, since they were my particular invention. But I have always Felt that a cinematic translation of any of the Dorgian works would have to be Exquisitely careful to capture the True nature of the works.

CR: They're doing so much with that C-I-G stuff these days, but I don't think Hollywood's really ready for werepigs.

THANKS SO MUCH FOR YOUR TIME, LADIES!

CR: Don't mention it! It was a pleasure to be here.

BH: Indeed.

<i>Timeline of the Dorgian Cycle</i>		
GALACTIC YEAR	EVENTS	CHRONICLE
0	Gorgeous xenobiologist Cap Riley discovers Realm In Atmospheric Domicile Of Regulated Force and loses her heart to the gorgeous planet... and its even more gorgeous ruler, Grelf of the House of Dorg!	<i>On the Soil Of R.I.A.D.O.R.F.</i>
241	<i>Spayswurm</i> hunter Feber loves his zathwop blade more than anything... until he develops feelings for his brother-in-arms, Dr Happio Gay!	<i>Over the Waves of the Silver Sea</i>
258	Galactic adventurer Olivia Joi never meant to settle in one place for long, but then, she never meant to lose her heart to Riadorfan opera diva Melody Sonata either... and that totally happened!	<i>Far from the Bayous of Bellenger IV</i>
275	Tormented orphan Liam O'Angel thought sex was bad and wrong... until he was transformed by the polyamorous passions of the wild Werepigs!	<i>Among The Werepigs of Horticult</i>

GALACTIC YEAR	EVENTS	CHRONICLE
689	A Civil War of succession plunges the galaxy into madness! Scullery maid Gauzi is the last hope of the House of Dorg, but only if she can claim her destiny... and her true love!	<i>Above the Mountains of Hrefldor</i>
981	Elnata, a simple maiden from the Lambda colonies, had always been secretly fascinated by the old-Earth custom of <i>droit de seigneur</i> ... until it suddenly became a personal concern!	<i>In Accordance With The Emperor's Laws of Jung-do</i>
1234	Crown Prince Alistair wishes for nothing more than the freedom of his people... and the genuine affection of his arranged bride, who may betray him yet!	<i>Under The Moons of Riadorf</i>
1254	Crown Prince Xantony runs from hreatbreak, but he cannot run from the laws of science... or the passionate telempathic pirate Francoque Gallo!	<i>Between The Rings of Lambda</i>

GALACTIC YEAR	EVENTS	CHRONICLE
1257	Frollo the Wise visits his mother's people, the gentle Neridans. He was expecting to be entertained... he was not expecting to be kidnapped by the eldest daughter of the High Priest of Quelm!	<i>The Triplets Trilogy: Upon the Seas of Ill'a'n'o</i>
1258	Carol the Secure in his Masculinity is very secure in his masculinity... but much troubled by the apparent dislike of his sister-in-law, the sassy and saucy Jallix!	<i>The Triplets Trilogy: Regardless of the Customs of Neridan</i>
1259	Hollo the Valiant has long resisted the charms of his double-sister-in-law Grier the Quadruple-Crowned Seer of Joul... until a warp-star demolition means they must work together... or die!	<i>The Triplets Trilogy: Ahead of the Stars of Verinium</i>



About the Authors

CLAIRE RASMUSSEN has been writing stories down in composition notebooks since she was a little girl, and wrote the first short vignettes featuring Andrinara Zuera Francel III, later to become the heroine of *Under the Moons of Riadorf*, when she was thirteen. She lives in a cozy cottage with her beloved cat, Miss Andi.

BELLE HEARTLEY has been aware she was destined to be an Author since her poem "My Dark Heart" was published in the *St Francis Academy for Young Ladies Annual Magazine*. She lives in a classically appointed home that was once a church, accompanied only by her Muse.

RASMUSSEN AND HEARTLEY started writing together in 1998 after meeting in an internet forum about healing energy vortexes. Together, they have published over a dozen novels and countless short stories and poems set in their Dorgian Galaxy.