

UNCROSSED STARS  
by  
NATHAN LONG

"Abry?"

"Yes, Mistress?"

"That one over there, on the terrace. The one with the white plumes on his mask. Who is he?"

"By his colors, Mistress, and those of his companions, I would venture he is a Balansco, and by his age... probably the second son, Renso."

We were at a moonlight masque, one of those affairs old Count Paradin throws every spring to stir up the young people and get them into trouble. His is a beautiful house in the Irazza hills, graced with an enormous garden,

liberally sprinkled with secluded gazebos and hidden arbors all too perfect for young hearts to spend too much time alone in. The place seems to have an enchantment about it that the romantically susceptible cannot resist - and my mistress was more susceptible than most.

"He looks at me, Abry, and I feel that I might faint."

"How unexpected."

"Abry?"

"Nothing, Mistress."

As was traditional, my mistress, Jevina, had come to the Count's revel unaccompanied by her mother, older sisters or cousins, and so her father had made the traditional compromise. He had sent me, Abriana D'Vessa, Javina's personal swordwoman - her swordhand - as chaperon. It was my duty to protect Jevina's life, and more importantly, her maidenhood.

It was in need of protection.

"It would be best not to return his glances, Mistress."

"Oh, but, Abry!"

"He is a Balansco. There is no love lost between your families."

"But he is so beautiful! And besides, it's too late. Our eyes have met. We have started the stars in their courses and nothing may alter their path."

I snorted. Jevina turned a cold eye on me.

"I sneezed, Mistress. The spring flowers always affect me thus."

It was true enough. My nose was never at its best in this season.

She frowned suspiciously at me, then looked back in the direction of the terrace. The Balansco youth caught her eye, then turned to whisper among his friends. Jevina tugged a scented kerchief from her sleeve and pressed it into my hand.

"Take this to him, Abry. Give it with my love. Go to him, quickly."

"Mistress, I was ordered by your parents..."

"I'll tell father about the midnight fencing lessons you gave my brother," she snapped. "And then where will you be."

Out on the streets is where I would be, or more likely hanged. Not all the fencing on those evenings had been done with swords. She had me.

I sighed. "I will attend to the matter, Mistress. But I will not speak for the consequences."

And with that, I turned on my heel and made my way across the garden.

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It was a dangerous game I was assisting my mistress in, for the blood feud between the Balanscos and the Cuccuros was centuries old. If such a liaison were to come to light, the streets of the city would once again run with crimson, some of which would undoubtedly be mine.

The only thing that mitigated the danger was the traditional blindness that occluded all eyes at the Count's masques. No matter how unsuccessful one's disguise, or how boldly paraded one's family colors, it was generally assumed all masks were perfect and that it was impossible for anyone to guess anyone else's identity. So, if Jevina and young master Balansco kept their tryst to this night and this night only, they were reasonably safe. Unfortunately, that possibility was as remote as the unfortuitous stars.

If only there was something I could do.

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I walked across the lawn, looking, not for Renso Balansco, who was still on the terrace, roughhousing with

his cronies, but for my opposite number, his swordhand. It was not my place to approach a member of the nobility directly.

I spotted a slight, sly-looking rogue dressed to match his master sitting and chatting with a huddle of other swordhands below the terrace. He was peeling a peach with a dagger and keeping a watchful eye on the comings and goings in the garden. I strode directly to him and made a formal bow.

"I have a message for your master."

"How unexpected."

He stood, and with a knowing nod to his companions, stepped a pace away with me. I showed him the kerchief.

"You know who this is from?"

"I would imagine the whole garden knows."

"Not if you asked them."

He laughed, but then his face soured. "The little fools."

I nodded. "What they would do could bring down both their houses."

"No harm if they keep it to tonight."

"But they won't."

"No, they won't" He sighed. "What's she like, your mistress?"

"Girlish, romantic. You know the age."

"But under that?"

I couldn't help it. I grimaced. "I'm glad I'm not him."

"Hmmm."

"And your master?" I asked.

"Oh, moody, poetical. You know the age."

"But..."

"Vain. He knows he's the prettiest thing in the city."

"Hmmm."

We both stood quiet for a moment. I looked over at Jevina. She was pointedly looking the other way. Renso's swordman took a bite of his peach.

"So what do you think?"

I turned back to him. "If it were a true love, a love that would last after the fire of passion dies, a love that would endure hardship and beautify their souls, perhaps then it might be worth all the death and grief that would accompany it. But..."

"But it won't be true love. It will be tawdry and messy and last just long enough for the bloodshed to begin."

I nodded. "The old feud would start once again, and we'd end up killing each other, and we don't want that."

He chuckled. "No, we don't want that."

I found him looking into my eyes, a mischievous smile curling his lips. A flush rose in my cheeks. I looked away.

"So, what can we do?"

"Sabotage?"

"Of what sort?"

He shrugged and we stood and thought. Suddenly a burst of laughter escaped me. He raised an eyebrow. I smiled.

"I told my mistress earlier I was suffering from the pollen, and it's true. It would be nothing for me to raise a sneeze."

I held up the kerchief. He looked puzzled.

"Very amusing, but.."

"Master Renso won't think so. He'll be outraged and disgusted, and that will solve our problem. The light of love will die in his eyes when he finds my gift, and my mistress will be in a cold fury when she sees what he does with her favor. It's perfect."

He grinned like an imp. "To think that a sneeze might stop a massacre. Madame, I am in full accord. Let us step behind this hedge and implement your plan."

We moved out of sight and I did the dirty deed. He took the soiled favor with careful fingers and we shook hands. Again he smiled.

"Perhaps later, Madame, we can discuss a safer union between our two houses."

Maybe Count Paradin's garden truly does have an enchantment upon it, for instead of putting my nose in the air and turning away as I would have another night, I reached out, took his peach and, my eyes never leaving his, bit deep into its juicy meat. He stepped forward, eyes glittering, but I put up a hand and motioned him toward his master.

"Duty first." I said, then slowly sauntered away, eating the peach as I went.

THE END

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First Published in Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine - Issue #9