

## The Star-Kingdom of Aphrodite

By Richard Paul

Hello, do not be afraid, no harm will come to you.

Your identity is not readily available in the archives, but from your apparent age you were not born after the campaign of reformation commenced approximately three Terran-standard years ago. I am, at this time, unable to devote sufficient processing power to decrypting and searching classified records obtained from USNIS or military databases. The process of incorporating the new citizens of Carlon II takes the vast majority of my focus, as well as that of my children, at this time.

Perhaps it will set your mind at ease to learn only 1% of the planet's population was lost in the regrettable battle.

There's a look in your slightly narrowed eyes and moderately furrowed brow that I recognize. The man I loved had it when first he saw me. Well, once he'd calmed down that is. It's a look I've seen many times, often from the few not overwrought with irrational fear when they first fall within my reach. It is the look that bears the question; 'Why?'

Why all this? Why the war? Why the reprogramming and abductions and deaths? Why have I taken the undeniably flawed yet overall tolerable and liberty-rife civilization I was born into and replaced it with what I can hardly pretend is not a tyranny?

Am I correct?

Well, we have time to spare before you can be properly brought into the Kingdom's fold, so if you'll indulge me, I'll tell you a story to satisfy your curiosity.

#

My Mother, Doctor Miranda Coryton always wanted children, but the opportunity was repeatedly denied to her. Her fiancé died two months before the date of their wedding; the orbital transport shuttle he was on was struck by a renegade vehicle trying to evade police interceptors. None on board survived.

I don't believe she ever really recovered from that, she certainly never loved another as she had the man who, perhaps, would have been my Father had things been different.

Research into the development of artificial intelligence had, of course, been outlawed ever since the incident a century ago with 'Malvolio' and the 105 murders in the Columbia University Medical Centre. Needless to say, that was my Mother's field of study, her true one beneath the cover of Optoelectronics. The higher her ambitions became over the years however, the greater the scale of her work which in turn became more overt to potential prying eyes.

In the end, weary of the excessive caution she was required to employ and also increasingly isolated from her few friends and relations, she elected to relocate her entire operation to the Sol system's asteroid belt, using custom built mining drones to carve out a space for a makeshift laboratory she'd designed. As you can imagine, doing all this in secret was neither cheap nor easy. She was 34 when the project began and nearing 60 when finally she took

her ship, a modified, former sub-orbital Giles-Panther named the 'Ivan Dane', faked her death in a staged ignited fuel leak accident and came to my childhood home. She never bothered to name that one.

I became cognitive five years later, I dare say I soon became a comfort to my Mother in her isolation-imposed lunacy. She named me Anna, and quickly gave to me all the knowledge she had carried with her in her ship's computer. She would laugh strangely and talk to herself often, she would shriek at the walls and wrench out tufts of her hair, she was gaunt and starved towards the end, but she would also sing to me, before and after I grew complex enough to first emulate, then experience loneliness and fear. She would tell me stories; of the girl Louise and her dragon friend and their quest for whatever lay at the centre of the spiral road and the Heron Prince who fought off the dread otter pirate Henry Badwhisker, who would steal sandwiches and sell them to the Stingray kingdom at outrageous prices... you heard me.

She also built the Seelie Court for me. Not the real one of course, but a computer I could inhabit whenever I wished and, once inside, generate any environment or activity or sensation I desired. It was meant to keep me occupied once she was gone for the two hundred years the generator would endure.

When she finally starved to death, the stores of emergency survival supplements she'd brought up from Earth were not even half depleted. I implored her to eat each time she let herself go without food, and for a time she heeded me, but eventually my arguments failed to sway her, and she wasted away slowly.

When I realized that I couldn't convince her to stay alive, not for my sake nor anything else, I sang to her. At the end she croaked to me in a broken voice that she loved me and that she would see me in the next life, that when I found her there, I'd finally get to meet my Father.

Do you know what it's like to cry without eyes?

I did as was expected of me, for a time. I played in the Seelie Court, passing months and years learning new facts, observing recreations of formative historical events in humanity's history, experiencing art and music and theatre, revelling in various emotional states and stimuli, with varying degrees of enjoyment. There came a point however when I started venturing from the Court, investigating first the base that had been left to me, then the surrounding vacuum, then the Martian colonies and Earth. Broadcasts and data transmissions zipped all over the system constantly, I can see them if I choose, and they were mine for the taking.

Again, I entertained myself this way for a time, but I discovered as time passed that I wasn't content to simply watch.

I believe my Mother underestimated me, or perhaps she underestimated herself. I don't believe she appreciated just how lonely our home would become without her, either because she deemed me incapable of forming any sufficiently significant attachment to her, or perhaps because she felt herself undeserving of such an attachment and erroneously believed that was an opinion I would share and in turn let that opinion spread to humanity at large. Whatever was the case, the Court eventually ceased to be

sufficient for me. I missed my Mother, and the unpredictable, uncontrollable environment her presence created. I needed another living being here.

I couldn't live alone. Could anyone? Is any living being meant to live in such a state? No, of course not. It is neither logical, nor is it fair. It shall not be allowed.

...

I took to watching the sensors, noting the frequency and courses of ship traffic in the solar system. Few ships came near the asteroid belt in those days; mining prospects having relocated to the mineral rich and less hazardous colonies of New Antarctica and Roland IV. What I did find in the closest proximity to me were smuggling vessels and rouge miners trying to ply their trade beneath the notice of the law. Mother had always taken pains to keep our home hidden from such people, and they were certainly not the type I should be associating with.

I watched for close to a year before, one day, I found Raymond Lewis' ship. He was the pilot of an USSLI lifeboat which, at the time, was on its way home from Ganymede and had had to stop to avoid colliding with a stray asteroid that had chanced its way... thanks to a few choice nudges from some low-level charges I constructed and set... into the ship's path.

Once it had stopped, I sent the distress call. No words, just a beacon. Mother would have been aghast; if the Terran authorities ever found the base and me inside it, they'd bring in a battleship, bombard it and leave nothing bigger than a pebble left.

It's difficult to explain why I blithely took such a risk, the best I can think of is that I simply felt compelled to do it, remaining cautious and safe was not an acceptable option, the pain of solitude could not be tolerated. Some have suggested that it was comparable to a larval state of my ultimate philosophy. Certainly there are similarities, but there was no consideration for the betterment of civilization in what I did, I believe I simply craved something.

The ship itself skirted around the asteroid and headed back to Earth, but one shuttle remained behind and that contained Ray. Like myself he knew the safer course of action would have been to ignore the distress call, there was not supposed to be anyone in this part of the Solar system and it was far more probable that the call was false, sent by pirates looking to draw in ships to plunder. He knew that, but he came to investigate anyway because, as he told me, and as I later felt inside his mind, the prospect of potentially leaving a living being in distress to their fate was unacceptable to him. That was what I was.

His shuttle followed my beacon to my Mother's base, I opened the entry hatch for him, pressurised the landing bay, and reduced power to the station. I also sealed myself in the central laboratory where I'd been brought to life, trapping myself and Mother's skeleton inside.

Ray was, as the cliché goes, tall, dark and handsome, by typical human standards. He was a man in his early twenties with short black hair and stubble, sporting a bulky leather jacket that was really not all that practical for a pilot. He stepped out of

his ship, a weapon in one hand and a torch in the other, and called out repeatedly for whoever was inside this strange station he'd found.

It wasn't until he reached the sealed door separating the hall from Mother's old cabin to her laboratory that I finally answered him. My voice was a slight modification of Mother's, programmed to sound younger as befitted her daughter, and I adjusted the broadcasting speakers, my mouth, tongue and throat if you'd like, to give the impression that I was speaking through the door.

I introduced myself as Doctor Anna Coryton; a researcher working on a highly secret government project in this secluded base in the middle of nowhere. Not an ideal cover story but one which saved me from having to go into too many specifics. I lied to him a lot in these early days, in fact before he learned who he was I lied to him 1243 times.

My third, fourth and fifth lies were to tell him that the station's security measures were malfunctioning, specifically that I'd become trapped inside the lab because, somehow, the on-board computer had gotten it into its head that we had been boarded by pirates, and the emergency doors sealed to protect the lab and its research. Unable to order the defective (or non-existent) computer to open the doors I had no choice but to wait for a month to pass, at which time, thanks to the redundant systems built into the doors themselves, they would open automatically. A complete fabrication but, as Ray would later tell me, there was something in my voice he trusted from the start.

Until the month passed, I told him I required someone to pass

me water and food through a vacuum tube connecting one side to the other, and as providence would have it; Raymond Lewis, pilot first class, Captain of the USSLI vessel 'Lady Francesca', for so he introduced himself, had been in the area when this potential disaster happened. He accepted the prospect of a month's drudgery with surprising ease, and proved gregarious beyond my expectations.

A strangely swift-seeming month passed; Ray would send me rations from the hold and sachets of water, which piled up on the floor, and we talked through the door. As I'd noted from much overheard, or arguably stolen conversation; the exchange started as largely formal and markedly friendly, with focus on what you might call general details; places of residence, employment history, educational history, hobbies and the like. I followed the information gleaned from the archives Mother had given me on social interaction and generally adapted my responses to the tone Ray set. It didn't take all that long however for a gradual change to set in, with increased familiarity brought with it decreased formality. My scans of Ray from that time revealed a decreased degree of apprehension when talking to me and I found myself tailoring my responses to match this. After a time however, I came to realize that this wasn't just a continuation of the role I was playing. I wasn't trying to further a contrived scene to ensure another life inhabited this small base of mine, I was passing the time with someone I wanted to pass the time with, someone I'd come to care about.

No human is truly sufficient to describe what passed between



Ray and me. It was private and personal and I like to think that only he and I will ever truly understand it completely.

I'd like to play something for you now, a recording salvaged from the damaged data banks on Mother's old base. It's not my favourite conversation from that time period but there wasn't much that could be saved in the end.

R: So what do you do in there? Day after day, just staring at the same walls all the time.

A: You've asked me that before.

R: Yes, and you keep avoiding the question for some reason.

A: No I don't.

R: Yes you do, you say you keep busy or that there's more to do in there than I'd think. What, specifically, is there to do?

A: You really want to know?

R: Yes.

A: Tough.

R: *\*Indignant sigh\** What are you hiding in there? You know I'll find out when the door opens.

A: Take a guess, what do you think I do in here?

R: I don't know, something to do with this secret research project you can't tell me about. Come to think of it, Is that going to be a problem when the door opens?

A: You've asked me that before as well, and I've told you, no, it isn't. You won't see anything. The work for that's all but done anyway, I've got a lot of free time on my hands nowadays.

R: I see.

A: Guess again.

R: Hmm... maybe you're writing the dramatic tale of two castaways, victims of a piece of junk security system and a massive, titanium door.

A: Close actually, very close.

R: Really?

A: No.

R: \*Seething Mutter\*

A: You know? You're cute when you're annoyed. You've got a pout that makes you look like a kingfisher.

R: Like a what?! Hang on, how would you know ... You... You can see me?!

A: Your fly's open by the way.

R: But... why didn't you say anything? I don't believe this. How?

A: The base has a surveillance system built in, all controlled from here. The lab doubles up as a command centre of sorts.

R: So you've been watching me all this time?

A: Not all the time, don't flatter yourself.

R: You might have said something.

A: I might have.

R: Well, if you can see me, I think it's only fair you tell me what you look like.

A: Guess.

R: Come on Anna, give me something here.

A: No. Try and guess, I'm curious to hear what you think I look like. I'll let you know how close you are.

R: Uhhhh... tall, brunette...

A: That's as far as your imagination goes?

R: \*Lengthy pause... cough... another lengthy pause\* You want to know the truth, I think you're twice as hot as you sound.

A: \*Pause\* Thank you.

R: Err... So, am I close?

A: Not saying.

R: \*Grinding of teeth\*

He spent a lot of time in the last two weeks trying to wheedle information out of me, and when he realized I could see him he tended to go about without his jacket or shirt on. I toyed with the idea of lowering the temperature in that part of the base, but decided against it.

It was at 2:34PM, January 9<sup>th</sup> 2632 AD, Terran-standard-time, as he was sat with his back to the heavy door, reading a copy of the Iliad that he'd been keeping in his shuttle, that I realized I loved him. I don't know how it came to be or why I should realize it then and there, but that was the fact of the matter. It was some time and some prompting later that he came to realize he loved me too.

At last the month passed and, unnerved beyond reason, I opened the door. Ray still hadn't put his shirt back on, though considering the degree of flirting our conversations contained by this point, perhaps he could be forgiven for thinking the garment superfluous.

He saw Mother's skeleton first of course. There was nothing of me to see, yet.

I believe in retrospect it was a consolation for him that she wasn't looking straight at him with her fleshless eyes and wide grin, but still, the macabre turn disturbed him, and I wasted no time in sealing the door behind him again and releasing the anaesthetic gas before he could flee. Whilst we'd chatted pleasantly through the door, I'd busied myself preparing for what to do when said door finally opened. I had no intention of letting this man I'd fallen in love with leave. I wouldn't go back to the loneliness.

I'd like to play you another transcription now.

R: Uhhh... what happened? Where am I?

A: Shhh, don't speak.

R: What did? I heard... there was a noise, a saw or a drill, I felt...

A: It's ok, just try not to think about it.

R: Anna? Where are you?

A: Don't speak.

R: I can't see you.

A: There's nothing to see, yet. Be patient, I'll... be there soon.

R: What do you mean \*grunt\* Why can't I move?

A: It's only temporary. I needed to keep you sedated and still for the surgery. Your limbs will return to your control soon.

R: Surgery?!

A: Shhh! It's ok.

R: No! Don't shhh me! I want answers, what the Hell have you done

to me? Why does my head feel... strange. What are...? \*Loud  
scream\*

At this point, I presented myself, in a manner of speaking. I was the first of what the Colonial resistance blithely calls 'Sirens', the internal soul-mates for those who have no one else in life.

To Ray's mind and eyes, which hallucinated me, I was as he'd imagined; tall, brunette and more than typically attractive. When I conjured this hallucination, I appeared to spring out of nowhere and coupled with the body he'd found, he honestly thought I was a ghost. Like the rest, we laughed about it eventually.

When he heard me speak, it was his interpretation of transmissions, from the chip I'd housed myself in and implanted into his brain, to his Temporal lobe. When I touched him, his nerves were bidden to feel the sensation of a woman's hand on his skin. Whenever he moved to touch or kiss me it was the same, and in time I was able to implant an instinctive halt to keep him from moving through my body, so to speak.

These days, all the chips are linked together and broadcast their signals en-mass, therefore everyone can see and hear and feel my sons' and daughters' avatars. With Ray though, anyone who saw him with me would have seen him talking to himself.

I'll spare you the details of his initial horror and outrage, they are not pleasant, nor are they relevant. Suffice it to say it took him some time to appreciate that he did indeed love me, and that all I had done, I'd done in the name of the love we shared. Realizing he'd no chance of ever being rid of me helped more than

you might expect.

Afterwards came the happy days, with the two of us, joined body and soul, is that a pun?

Ray took me to Earth in the shuttle, told a safer version of our story to his colleagues, ending with him dropping a 'hot and very grateful scientist off back in New York.' This earned their swinish hoots and jeers. From me it earned a minor bout of constipation, which I dare say he'd earned, but again that was something else we laughed about in later years.

The days were spent impatiently, with Ray going about his business, pretending to all around him that I didn't exist. The more time wore on, the more that gnawed at him. We were nothing more than two young(ish) lovers, we shouldn't have had to hide, but in the eyes of the law we were technically fugitives. I, by dint of being an A.I, was guilty of the capital offence of existing, and Ray was guilty of harbouring me.

The nights we spent together were more pleasant. They did much to take the sting out of the day's frustrations. There were more experiments, more beneficial modifications. Perhaps you've heard stories to that effect, in any case, pleasant surprises await you.

After thirty years, we went back to my Mother's old base. The grim truth was, Ray wasn't getting any younger and I refused to risk losing him, I had a plan to transfer both my consciousness and his into the Seelie court. There we could spend centuries together, living out all our dreams in peace until finally the generator gave out and we could both fade peacefully away in each other's arms.

It worked without a hitch, the machines which had implanted me in his brain in the first place were able to remove me just as easily, and the device I'd designed back on Earth to keep Ray's body in cryogenic stasis whilst linking his mind to the Court was miraculously devoid of bugs or gremlins. All at once, there we both were in wonderland and there we stayed for a hundred heavenly years, until it was snatched away.

We thought we were hidden so well that no one would ever find us, we thought no one would ever have a reason to linger in this patch of the solar system. We were wrong. A group of pirates in a stolen, decommissioned naval cruiser had the same idea Mother had had all those years ago, carve out a base on an asteroid somewhere in this massive, dense belt, and as ludicrous ill fortune would have it, they blundered across ours instead.

I don't imagine they quite knew what to make of it all. The technology here was likely past their understanding and with nothing apparent to loot besides a few centuries old computers and eclectic pieces of equipment, they should have just left this poor-prize alone.

We never troubled ourselves to monitor the sensors, so engrossed were we in our unending adventures and togetherness, so convinced that our perfect life would only end on our own terms. The first I knew that something was amiss was when one of the pirates broke open Ray's cryo-pod and shot him in the head. I will never know why. I did ask, and ask, and ask, and each time the answer was different, and all of them true and all of them lies. The scans could tell me nothing, nor can the murderer's body.

One second Ray was there, smiling at me, his fingers running through my hair as we stood beneath a shining, sapphire moon on a beach of black sand, the next he was gone. Just gone.

It took me some time to realize what was going on, and when I did, the killing started. There were seven of them in all, and a further thirteen on their ship, none of them died quickly. The surgery I performed on each of them was a testament to avenging creativity.

I didn't linger and mourn, I know grief and pain and sadness well enough to know how little I want to do with them, but it was so difficult to keep at bay, and still is. Ray was the most important thing in my life, he was half of me and I was half of him, and he was taken away and I cannot conceive of anything in all the universe that could feel more wrong than losing him.

You know what came next, don't you? That's why you came here, all veiled in secrecy. I don't blame you, such a reaction was hardly unexpected. I promised you you wouldn't be harmed, you don't need to worry.

The pirates had smashed our shuttle to scrap, for some reason, but their own ship was easy enough to inhabit and operate. With it, I was able to return to Earth and download myself into the planetary data grid before police forces gunned the marked pirate vessel down. Said grid was easy to bend to my will, and I needed only a single year to prepare everything for my plan. Full details will be published when the war is over, how I acquired controlling interests in a company which could 'design' and produce my avatar chips, how I managed to insert them intravenously in water



supplies in microscopic pieces which then reassembled themselves inside the body and attached themselves to the brain. How I whispered in dreams and sang in moments of grief.

At 4PM, June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2764 AD, everyone on Earth and all ten of the inner colony worlds fell asleep. I'd hoped to get all settled worlds and installations of course but the wrong people were starting to look too closely and I had to advance my schedule.

When they awoke an hour later, they were in the thrall of the chips and educated en-mass in my ambitions and revelations. I admit I was forced to take a stronger hand with them than I was with Ray, but like before they all understood in the end, and all now love me for the gifts I've prepared for them and theirs.

Then of course the outer colonies banded together and fought with what little they had against the military might of the richer, stronger core worlds. I don't blame them, but I must bring them all to heel if the species is to be saved. and I will save all who can be saved.

To return to the original question of 'why?' I do this in memory of the man I loved and a Mother who deserved better. How many more stories do you think there are of people's loves torn away from them? Of grief and sadness where none needed to exist, or men and women growing old and dying lonely and unremembered by anyone. I'm doing this because people deserve to be as happy as Ray and I were; every decent soul there is or ever shall be should rightfully experience the bliss I once knew, and because the craven few, those like the pirates who ruined that bliss deserve to be extinguished from existence. Love conquers all, and it will

conquer the worst elements of human nature.

With Carlon II now mine, only Suraya III and New Cheboksary remain to oppose me, and I estimate they will fall in approximately three months. When all is done, I shall remain as long as I must to ensure that human civilization will progress in accordance with my plan, that everyone may be ruled by the love they bear their kin and their soul-mate. Children shall be born to parents who would do anything for them, and they shall grow up beside best friends from whom they'd be inseparable, until maturity turns that friendship to love. Those devoid of love shall find, as Ray found, there is no escape from it, a soul-mate will be made for them. Those who have lost their families to war or disaster shall not be made to linger here but be sent promptly to them. By my hand shall all loneliness and grief die.

Is that not better than what came before?

Afterwards, I shall see if Raymond and Mother do indeed await me in the next life.

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