

*Series Title: Le Storie Del Sole e Dalla Luna*

*(Stories of the Sun and the Moon)*

*Book II: I Servi Fedeli Del Dio Della Luna*

*(The Faithful Servants of the Moon God)*

*Chapter Number: One*

***“Matters of the Heart”***

*Author: D. Sanders*

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“I’m sorry Gallus. I just cannot be what I think you need.” Fiamma said with a sigh as he adjusted his yellow robes nervously. He didn’t want to break Gallus’ heart, but knew this meeting was going to go badly. They’d only been lovers a short time, and while he liked the tall young lunar acolyte, he wasn’t in love with him. It was better to end it now before Gallus’ heartbreak would be harder to endure. Lunar priests tended to love without reserve and Fiamma didn’t want that sort of all encompassing relationship. Gallus to him had been nothing more than attraction to a broad, earthy-toned and handsome young man in the prime of his youth. At almost eighteen years and ready to exchange his blue hued novice robes for the white robes of his chosen priesthood. It was painfully obvious Gallus needed much more intimacy of the soul than Fiamma was able to give him.

Gallus sat there stunned. He couldn’t find his voice suddenly, his throat closed and his hands fisted into the material of his light blue robes. He felt as if the floor has just been pulled out beneath him and he was falling, falling into an abyss in which there was no escaping from. “Why?” He managed to croak out, his voice cracking.

“Oh Gallus. I’m sorry. Please I like you, I do, very much, but I do not love you. You need someone you can care about who cares as much about you in return. I’m not the one, I wish I was, you’re a wonderful man Gallus. You’re an asset to the order, you’ll be head priest here one day I’m sure. Your devotion is one of the most beautiful things about you. I just cannot be what you need. I have never been able to love like that. My affection for you ends there. I’m so sorry, I really am, but we need to end this before it goes too far. I will always look to you fondly as one of the sweetest lovers I’ve ever had.” Fiamma said trying to be kind, he really did care about Gallus’ feelings and hated having to hurt him.

“I see. Forgive me for not being enough.” Gallus whispered in reply, his head bent low, his stomach a knot of pain.

“I never said that you were not enough Gallus. I am the one who is ‘not enough’ for you. If there is one here needing forgiveness it is I, not you. I fear I led you to believe my feelings were deeper than they were.” Fiamma reached out to touch Gallus’ hand and he flinched away in pain.

"Oh Gallus. I'm sorry." Fiamma sighed, seeing Gallus was struggling to maintain his ever-calm exterior, the pain in his eyes was clearly evident.

Gallus only nodded silently and turned and left the room, his broad shoulders drooping with a heavy emotional burden. Fiamma let him go, any further communication would only make Gallus' pain more unbearable. Fiamma settled back down by his fire and poured a glass of bitter white wine and sipped at it with a sigh. His mentor coming in from the other room and joining his novice by the fire and pouring himself a glass of the wine and adjusting his golden robes as he sat down.

"That was hard I know. But better for him in the long run. I told you before you began playing with him that lunar priests base partnerships on emotions we solar priests could barely begin to hope to fathom. I warned you if you accepted his affections you were going to cause him pain. I hope you remember this lesson and don't let handsome young men make you forget your better judgment. Remember the pain you saw in his eyes today and never again take a lover to your bed that feels more deeply than you do. If you cannot return like for like, you keep to yourself."

"Aye father. I know that now."

"And Gallus is the one paying more dearly than you. Pray to Sol for him and his heart tonight. It is severely broken by your own hands."

Fiamma stood and nodded silently. It was indeed entirely his fault and his mentor was right. So Fiamma headed out to the temple to light candles and ask Sol in prayer to help mend Gallus' heart.

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Mane was standing out of sight, his heart breaking for his favorite novice when a soft voice sounded at his shoulder. "Don't you wish sometimes you could do more?" Sol asked his brother as he appeared in the field beside his brother to look at the devastated youth who was crying in private under the stars.

"Aye. I wanted to tell him not to when it happened. It's not our place to make their choices for them. Even when we know they are making the wrong ones." Mane sighed moving to sit on a large boulder. Sol flopped into the grass at his feet.

"I have a novice in my temple right now, making quite a lot of requests on this one's behalf. The one that caused this heartbreak."

Mane nodded. "He's a good lad, just not the right one. Gallus will bear him no ill will. That is not in his nature."

"Nor is it in yours, your followers are the best of mortals. I sometimes envy you that. I have quite a few I want to throttle at times for being idiots."

Mane chuckled. "Even mine do things that I would deem supreme idiocy. Like we are any better at times?"

"You have a point my brother. I don't deny I've made quite a few mistakes in my time."

"Yes you have, but so have I and let us not discuss our mistakes when we are on speaking terms. We will only fight again."

"Aye. So back to your Gallus here, I'm getting requests to send him someone that is right. You know who that is, Gallus is your dominion."

"There is no need brother. The one for him will come soon enough. I just hope when the time comes Gallus sees it for what it is and this incident doesn't make him fear to love again. That is in his nature. He will close off his heart for a while for the fear of the pain."

Sol nodded and sighed. "Mortal love is decidedly your dominion, you understand it and all it's multiple facets better than I."

Mane nodded, love was indeed his dominion and he knew the ache and pain it caused when it was lost better than anyone. He himself lived every day with that gutting pain of love that was gone. He turned and looked at his brother, the cause of his ache. He sighed, now was not the time to fight over an ancient heartbreak. Gallus needed him and Sol working together for the moment. "Yes, it is my domain and it will come for Gallus soon. Does your novice ask for intervention of a vague nature?"

"Aye. So I give his request to me, to you. You may now interfere in his love life if you choose to, the request was made of mortal free-will." Sol winked and Mane stood.

"Now is not the time. But when that time does come, if he hesitates I will at least be able to guide him with advice."

"Will you show me his chosen? I am curious." Sol asked and Mane nodded turned and vanished. Sol followed and together they reappeared by a carriage making it's way to the temple and was preparing to stop at an inn for the night.

A youth of about twelve with blond hair which was wild and free and hung in snarls over his frightened and defiant green eyes was manhandled out of the carriage by what was obviously his father and told sternly to wait.

"This is he?" Sol asked eyeing the boy up and down. "He'd be quite beautiful if they cleaned him up a bit." The boy was fey of build almost to the point of being a waif of a boy. His demeanor was simultaneously shy, terrified and angry.

"Aye. He's the son of that foul Lord there shouting at the driver. The boy was born mute and has only been kept at home until his mother bore another son. That son has been born and now that they no longer need him as an heir his father is taking him to the temples. He's been abused greatly; he has never known the hand of kindness even if he is perhaps the most gentle of children himself. I've seen him tend a broken wing of a lark he found in the garden with such gentle fingers he looked like mother looks when she is making a new creation."

Sol nodded watching the boy stand silently off to the side of the road. "He looks wild."

"He is, he will find it very difficult to fit into the order. He has been left alone most of his life, so getting along with others will be difficult, especially since he has no way to communicate his needs. He cannot speak, he cannot read, he cannot write. He will feel utterly alone and lost."

"Poor boy. I know the Father a little; he used to worship me, now he does so as a token on holidays. He is a nasty mortal, beats his wife, adulterous and murderous. Our Father has a very 'special' place for the likes of him."

"I know, He almost killed young Praduc there as a child when they discovered he couldn't speak. He was barely a babe out of arms then and they've treated him like a simpleton ever since. He is nothing of the sort."

"Mortals often confuse being mute with also being dumb." Sol said with resignation, once again hating the fact he couldn't physically knock some sense into the mortals he protected.

"Far too often. He is coming into learning late in life, but once he discovers the brotherhood encourages learning he will take to it well."

"Your Gallus is a fine teacher. I can see now the path of these two. Praduc is too young right now; at this stage in a mortal life this is a large age difference. Gallus is newly man, this child hasn't even hit puberty yet."

"Aye, the friendship will be built first. Which is the best of foundations. Gallus will be the brother he needs right now he must understand caring first before he will understand the deeper emotions he is capable of." Mane said as they watched the father grab the boy by the scruff of his tunic collar and drag him inside the inn stumbling. Sol growled.

"Filthy pig. I wish Father would let us give men like that a taste of their own medicine."

"Father holds that right and he can do things that neither you or I could imagine as punishment. I would not want to be that mortal for all the world." Mane said and Sol chuckled.

"Aye, Father is quite creative at times." Sol said as both Gods returned to where Gallus had cried himself to sleep under his favorite tree by the lake.

Sol reached down and patted his hair. "Handsome brute, I am sorry you suffer." Sol said looking up at his brother.

"Not for long." Mane said as he moved to cradle Gallus' head in his lap to keep him warm and protected.

"Fair the Day my brother." Sol said as the sun slowly broke the horizon.

"Fair the Day my brother." Mane replied in kind as Sol returned to his temple and Mane stayed by Gallus' side to offer comfort to a saddened soul and protect his favorite young novice from being foolish with his health and falling asleep in the cold moist air of the lake.

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*Chapter Number: Two*

***“The Brotherhood of Friendship”***

*Author: D. Sanders*



“Very good Praduc.” Gallus said looking over the parchment where the youth had copied his letters to immaculate perfection. “You have a very clean hand, you could be a scribe someday if you wish.” Gallus added and at nearly fourteen Praduc beamed with the compliment.

He sought desperately for Gallus’ approval. Since the horrible night he’d arrived, terrified and alone, it had been Gallus who had noticed how frightened he had been and had taken the boy into his arms to let him weep while his father demanded the priests take his ‘useless burden of a son’ into the order. The words were always painful to hear and while the elder priests had been occupied with a raving lord in their midst in the middle of the night, it had been Gallus, the new lunar priest attending his late night duties who had turned an eye to the boy and noticed the pain. Praduc would always be grateful to him for that one moment, the first time anyone had ever embraced him in comfort.

Since then it had been Gallus who had been assigned as his tutor and every afternoon Praduc spent several hours learning whatever lesson Gallus had come up with that day. First it had been simple reading, learning his letters first. That had taken several weeks, but when he’d finally grasped the concept, Gallus had been hard pressed to keep up with texts that stimulated a suddenly active mind.

From there he’d learned to write which helped vastly in being able to communicate with others in the brotherhood. Up until that time it had been a series of failed pantomimes to articulate what he needed. Only Gallus ever seemed to understand those early days before he could write. His patience seemed endless and he always had a gentle kind smile to offer Praduc in those moments when Praduc broke down in frustrated tears.

Now he was copying large texts, both reading and writing at the same time and he was enjoying every minute with those dusty scrolls Gallus brought in from the archive everyday. There wasn’t a subject from theology to mathematics to history that Praduc didn’t devour like a man only allowed to watch a festival harvest feast and never partake in it’s delights. When Gallus praised him, Praduc’s world rejoiced. He lived to see Gallus smile; Gallus was transformed when he smiled. His whole face became a bright beacon of kindness and caring when he smiled and Praduc far preferred it to his usual melancholy expression. Gallus’ eyes always seemed sad and Praduc often wondered where that sadness

came from when he couldn't think of anyone ever wanting to hurt such a gentle man.

"There is little else I think I can teach you, you learn so fast. You already know more about history than I do and that was my favorite subject when I was learning." Gallus said and Praduc's heart lurched. The sad look on his face had returned. Praduc grabbed his ever-present pad of parchment and his charcoal stick and scribbled frantically.

"Are you dismissing me?" The note read and Gallus sighed.

"I wish I could say 'no' Praduc. I do. You are such a joy to teach, but you've moved beyond my talents very quickly. There are other talents in you that also need to be taught. Father Bendis has been after me for a long time to release you to him. He says, and I quote, 'that your talent with books is exceeded only by your talent with the livestock and other animals here under his care'. He has wanted you as a pupil almost since you set foot in door. I have to agree with him, I don't think there is anything on four legs that doesn't adore you." Gallus said smiling fondly.

Praduc was scribbling again and handing a note back to Gallus. "I do love the animals and want to study with Father Bendis too. Can't I do both? I don't want to stop lessons with you Father Gallus. Please don't send me away."

"Oh Praduc, I'm not sending you away. Please don't think that. You please me very much; you're the type of student a teacher wishes for every day. I would be a very poor teacher if I kept you selfishly to myself when I see such massive potential. From here, your book studies will be with the archive master. You will learn the precision of a scribe and have access to materials even I can't get my hands on without begging Father Durkin for hours to let me into the scrolls. I will envy you your apprenticeship to him. This is not good-bye Praduc. It is a graduation from remedial learning to higher study. This is a good thing for you." Gallus said and waited for Praduc to write again.

"I wish I could feel happier. You have been so wonderful to me Father Gallus. My heart hurts thinking I will no longer see you everyday. I will envy your new student." Praduc wrote, trying to fight tears.

"I will not have a new student this term. I am taking a pilgrimage to the capital temple for my own further study. I'm leaving in a few days."

Praduc thought his world was collapsing and his hand shook as he wrote.

"How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know. I will come back though, this is not permanent and I look forward to seeing how far you've progressed when I return." Gallus said and Praduc began to cry and dropped his pad and flung his arms around Gallus' neck as he cried.

Gallus petted the soft sandy blond hair that never seemed to be tamed and held the youth in his arms. Praduc was much smaller than others his age and seemed even more so beside Gallus' rather large frame. At just twenty years old, he had filled out physically as a man rather early and not only was he tall; he was broad and strong of chest and shoulder. His frame dwarfed the boy sobbing against his chest. "I will miss you too Praduc. I do hope with all your new studies you will find time occasionally to write to me and tell me how you are doing."

Praduc nodded pathetically as he clung to his teacher. Gallus sat him up and wiped his tears with the sleeve of his robe and smiled kindly. "Such a joy. I will indeed miss you as my student." Gallus said kissing Praduc's forehead with brotherly affection before standing up and laying an arm about Praduc's shoulders escorting the still sniffling youth out of the classroom.

"Let us both celebrate the next chapter of your life here Praduc. Father Gandes mentioned this morning the strawberries were ready. I'm sure we can beg one of the kitchen staff to allow us to steal some with cream."

Praduc chuckled despite his mood. Gallus had a weakness for anything sweet and involving heavy amounts of cream and fruit. They managed a large bowl from an obliging kitchen servant and they shared the treat together, spoiling their respective dinners. It was perhaps the most melancholy joy Praduc had ever experienced in his life.

A few days later Praduc stood at the gates of the temple grounds and waved farewell to Gallus' cart until it disappeared over the horizon on his journey to the capital and the larger temples in the city proper over a hundred leagues away.

It seemed to young Praduc an unfathomable distance and his spirits were poor as he turned to head to his new lessons.

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*Dear Father Gallus,*

*I received your last letter yesterday. I am sorry to hear about the continuing poor state of the food there. I suppose it would be rather heartless of me to mention that the peaches just came in from the orchard this morning and I ate a*

*huge bowl of them in your honor this morning at first mess. I remember city food, and you have my eternal pity with the state of freshness or lack thereof. Here's a tip, horde as much salt as you can, it helps cover up the taste.*

*I thought you'd like to hear some good news to help take your mind off the affronts to your gastric system. I have graduated again and while I'm not taking the vows of either brotherhood, I have been made an honorary brother of both orders and will be staying on in the temple here in a dual capacity. Father Durkin has made me his assistant and I am now officially a keeper in the archive. If you ask me nicely when you get back I may just be able to make it easier for you to get your hands on those scrolls you mentioned you enjoyed so much. I won't make you beg me near as much as Father Durkin. I think he enjoys saying 'no' just because he can far too much actually. He will always give in eventually; I think he just likes to see everyone grovel like dogs over a bone. He has a sadistic sense of humor I've come to learn these past few years.*

*When I'm not on duty in the archive, I'm on emergency call with Father Bendis and Brother Cadrac. There was a brush fire over on the Far side of the Solar Temple last week, there are a lot of wounded animals here currently, the poor dears. I've had the most adorable bear cub in my room now for the past five days. Poor little thing had burns all over the pads of his feet; he was lucky to get out alive. Once he's healed enough I'll move him to the outside pens, he's destroyed most of my bedding and I will need a new desk from where he used it as a chew toy. You don't want to see the state of my mattress, it looked like mid-winter in my room this morning and I was only gone a quarter of an hour getting food for the little one. You can stop laughing now at my expense.*

*Not much else changes around here as you well know, I miss you terribly. Everyone is usually too busy with their duties to spend time with me. You know how long it takes to have a conversation with the mute boy and I've been out of padded paper for a week now and Father Durkin would roast me alive if I took archival sheets and cut them up to use. So I'm back to looking like a fool doing pantomime until my order for padded stock arrives from the city. I ordered it eight weeks ago and have not heard anything since. Don't tell Father Durkin I'm using this paper to write to you on, remember that roasting I mentioned? Be kind to your poor devoted Praduc, think of my hide please, I'd like to keep it in tact a little while longer.*

*Thank you again for all your patience with me in the beginning, it still means a great deal to me. I wanted you to know I've memorized that book of hand signs you sent finally. At least paper or no paper when you come home at least I'll have you to practice this form of communication with, I'm looking forward to that immensely. It will be wonderful to finally carry on a conversation with somebody. I can't thank you enough for finding that book and sending it to me.*

*I am more than grateful for everything you've done for me since that very first day I arrived here, I'll never be able to repay your kindness towards me, you truly are the first, best and most faithful friend I've ever been blessed with in my life.*

*I hope you're still doing well (apart from your stomach woes) and I hope you're coming home soon.*

*Yours,  
Praduc*

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*Dear Praduc,*

*Thank you for stating that the peaches are in season, you made your poor old tutor cry you evil boy.*

*Congratulations on your graduation, I'm thrilled to hear you've done so well. I brag about you constantly to the other teachers here, they all wish you'd come here for further study, I told you before I left once (perhaps more come to think of it) you're every teacher's dream student.*

*I had heard about the fire, I was glad to hear no one got hurt (other than your bedding and desk. Honestly, I only laughed a minute or two at your expense.) and it was contained before it reached the inner grounds. I was distraught to hear we lost a few of the citrus trees in the orchard though; here I go again, thinking with my stomach. You must get bored with my continual dissertations on the joys of the harvest. I'm surprised I don't weigh more than I do sometimes. Although I have lost quite a few pounds living here, eat just enough to survive and no more, you can't. City folk have no idea how bad their food is, it's criminal.*

*Speaking of criminal, your non-sanctioned use of archival stock to write to me is a secret safe with me if you promise to let me into the back archive when I get home. The library here is wonderful, but ours is older and I just know there are juicy scrolls in there that Durkin never let me get my hands on, I agree with your assessment of his personality, the old dog. You better burn this letter Praduc after you read it.*

*On the subject of paper, I went over to the paper supplier here in the city. They had your order and someone forgot to send it, by the time you get this letter you'll probably already have your pads, I yelled at them for you and this made*

*me so angry I scoured the city for alternatives and may have just found the answer to all your problems.*

*I had stopped in my search at a small café for some tea and they had the most amazing thing I'd ever seen. It was like a chalkboard in design; only the surface was smooth and white and not made of slate. Much lighter material and literally as smooth as glass. They had the daily menu written on it and I watched the owner wipe it off with a simple rag and write on it again. The lack of dust and residue was like magic. They called it a wax board and instead of chalk it uses little sticks of wax to write on it with. It was fascinating and I must have spent all day looking for the manufacturer. I had them make you one small enough so that you can carry it on your belt, you'll never be without a way to communicate again. I hope it reaches you in time for your seventeenth. Happy Birthing Day from your old tutor with love, Praduc. I sent you with the board a supply of sticks, a mold to make more and the ingredients they use for the wax composition. I don't ever want to hear you had difficulty again, that is a travesty to me.*

*I have memorized that book as well, I'm looking forward to getting this form of communication working with you and I hope to be able to teach it to others too eventually. There are more people who will benefit from this than just you and I eventually. I am excited to put this into application rather than theory at last.*

*You have such profound and amusing things to say and anyone who doesn't stop to talk with you is missing out on something wonderful. It saddens me to think you're lonely, I promise I'll always have time for you when I come home whenever you just need the proverbial ear to listen or just for the sake of a chat. I will ever be your friend; you have my eternal vow on that matter.*

*Speaking of coming home, by the time you get this letter, I should probably already be on the way home. I've finished my studies myself and cannot wait to come home again. I'll probably be five or six days behind this letter, so I'll miss your birthday sadly, but promise me you'll save me some of Freida's cake please.*

*I'll see you soon, and I'll probably not even recognize you anymore when I get there. Three years is a long time even if it seemed to fly by. Take care of yourself and don't forget to save me cake.*

*Yours,  
Gallus*

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Gallus had barely stopped the ox pulling his small cart in the courtyard of the order's grounds and had just climbed out when he was crushed in an impact of a body that hurled itself at him. Gallus almost stumbled over and his arms instinctively grabbed back and he laughed at the blond head buried deep in his chest sobbing for joy. Gallus regained his balance and laughed and hugged back tightly. "I missed you too Praduc. What a wonderful welcome home." Gallus chuckled, the head was taller than when he'd left, still petite in comparison but indeed taller and thus far the only thing Gallus has seen since the face was hidden against his own person.

Gallus reeled in shock as Praduc let him go and stepped back. The face that turned up towards him was not the face of the boy he'd left behind, but that of a beautiful young man. Large green eyes shimmered with joyful tears and a brilliant smile that belonged to Gallus alone sent Gallus to his spiritual knees. Praduc was breathtakingly beautiful on the eyes and for a moment all Gallus wanted to do was fall into those eyes that looked upon him with such devoted affection and never come out again.

Suddenly that face grinned impishly and a tiny napkin wrapped bundle was placed in Gallus' hands snapping Gallus out of his reverie for a moment. "What's this?" He asked and for the first time Praduc used the hand signals he'd studied from the book Gallus sent.

:Open it: he signed and Gallus nodded with a smile and complied.

"CAKE!" Gallus laughed heartily, his deep bass of a voice rumbling with mirth as he closed his eyes and took a taste of heaven. Touched that Praduc had indeed saved him some of his birthing day cake.

:Would I forget to save you a piece of paradise after your long torture against your stomach?: Praduc signed and Gallus signed back with his mouth full of spice cake.

:You are the best of friends Praduc. How foolish of me to think you'd forget your tutor.:

:Never. This is working pretty well already.: Praduc replied as people began to gather in the courtyard to welcome Gallus home again.

"Aye. It is." Gallus spoke and signed simultaneously, wiping his mouth with the napkin, the cake history as smiling faces converged on his person to welcome him home.

Praduc for the moment was swallowed in the mass of people and utterly ignored and jostled aside as Gallus was heartily slapped and hugged in welcome.

Gallus noticed the acceptance of being disregarded in Praduc's face, it was worse than Praduc had let on in his letters. He could see now how lonely Praduc must have truly been, they looked right through him as if he didn't exist. Gallus' heart gave a painful twinge. The sweetest soul in the world to him was Praduc, his letters had always brought joy and a piece of home with them while he was away. How could his brothers ignore such a treasure? It was beyond Gallus' comprehension.

Praduc just patiently stood off to one side, waiting. His smile never faltering as he gazed adoringly at Gallus and Gallus' heart once again gave a little twinge, this time of a more intimate nature. "You will all bury me alive! Thank you for such a wonderful welcome home. It is good to be home. Praduc would you be so kind as to help me carry my bags back to my rooms?" Gallus asked wanting nothing more than time to talk to Praduc alone, the hand signs were indeed working better than anticipated and Praduc was immediately at his side holding a pair of heavy bundles.

"Don't carry those, those are all full of books and you'll fall over. Carry this one please, it's lighter and give me those. I'm the one built like a pack mule." Gallus winked taking the heaviest bags from Praduc and replacing them with the lightest one, which contained his robes.

:I don't see a mule. Maybe a big bear, but not a mule.: Praduc grinned signing and Gallus chuckled.

"Bear am I? Better a bear than a jackass I suppose." Gallus laughed and Praduc snorted. His version of laughter was more a series of inarticulate snorts. It was music to Gallus' ears. It was indeed wonderful to be home again. He'd missed Praduc far too much than he dared to admit. And was far too glad to see him again than he also dared admit.

When his affection had turned to love for Praduc he had no idea, but there was no denying the fact that he did love Praduc well and truly and this also scared Gallus deeply and worried him. Would he lose the friendship over this? The last time he confused the deep bonds of friendship with love and infatuation he'd been hurt badly so Gallus was in no way going to rush into anything anymore. He'd just watch for a while and harbor his affections in secret for the time being and shamelessly stare at the backside of a graceful youth who preceded him up the stairs. He was beautiful coming and going, how could the brothers ignore something so beautiful? Were they all blind? Gallus just shook his head in confusion, those were thoughts for later, right now he just wanted to enjoy

Praduc's company, and give him the rest of the presents he'd brought home for him for his birthing day.

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(Stories of the Sun and the Moon)

*Book II: I Servi Fedeli Del Dio Della Luna*  
(The Faithful Servants of the Moon God)

**Chapter Number: Three**

**"Lover's Moon"**

*Author: D. Sanders*



The weeks that followed Gallus' return to the brotherhood temples were wonderful, it was sublime to be home again. And not just because his stomach and pallet were no longer being affronted by food long past being considered fresh, it was Praduc that made coming home such a joy.

Gallus being a lunar priest kept later hours than most and he tended to sleep through first mess. Every morning he woke up to a bowl of his favorite fruit and a small pitcher of cream sitting chilled in a bowl of ice on his doorstep. It was his favorite for breakfast and Praduc's kindness at making sure Gallus didn't miss it was more than touching.

He slowly crawled out of bed and retrieved the peaches and cream from his doorstep and sat at his overflowing desk and ate his breakfast as he slowly came to wakefulness. Trying to ignore his daily reaction after waking up from having rather intimate dreams of a certain young blond. "I'm pathetic."

"Yes, you are." Came the voice of Mane who appeared and settled on Gallus' bed. Gallus frowned.

"My lord, come to tease me?"

"Yes and no. I've come to offer unsolicited advice. Stop being so afraid of making a step forward Little Gallus, you're acting like a dotard of sixty and not a youth of twenty and three. Youth is wasted on the young sometimes."

"A dotard? Is that really how I'm acting?"

"Yes and you're driving me crazy already. You're a young man Gallus, try acting like it once in a while. You're in your prime and wasting precious time because you lock yourself away from your own emotions. I was there the night you were hurt dearest, I know you felt pain from rejection. It is time to let that go to stay in the past. Your reticence is maddening."

"Since when do you meddle in mortal affairs?"

"When mortal's are too thick headed to do it themselves Little Gallus. I want to show you something, perhaps this will bring home to you how much he needs you." Mane said and the room evaporated and Gallus was watching a scene from the past it seemed.

He saw Praduc alone and crying, his father screaming at his men in the other room. The new son had been born and he was finally getting rid of his burdens and ordering them to get the carriage ready.

The scene faded to that first night, where Praduc had cried himself to sleep in Gallus' arms. Terrified, but no longer alone.

The scene changed to show Praduc after Gallus had left, how he had wandered off to cry alone before heading to his lessons.

Then a series of images appeared of Praduc and various people talking about him within earshot as if because he was mute he was also deaf. Gallus' blood ran cold. They acknowledged how kind and sweet natured Praduc was while in the same breath were condemning him to loneliness. Complaining how difficult it was to talk to him, remarking offhandedly that he was basically less than human due to his handicap.

"Now I show you a scar on his heart that he obtained after you left little Gallus, one he has not confided in you because he is ashamed." Mane said and the scene changed to the gathering of Virgin's at the temple, Praduc looked about fifteen and stunningly beautiful dressed in all in white. But his face was sad and when the Novice reached him, rather than pouring the sacred mead into Praduc's cup he knelt and patted Praduc on the head like a child.

"Dearest, this isn't for the likes of ones such as you. Perhaps it is better not to torture yourself another year. No one will ever share your mead, I think it best you go back to your rooms little one. The Lover's Moon is not for you, I'm sorry little love. But it is best you learn this now, rather than later. You know no one ever drinks from your cup, no one ever will. Love is for normal people, not you little one."

The gutting ache Gallus felt inside at those words barely touched the emotional raping of spirit those words had on Praduc and Gallus saw him race back to his rooms sobbing.

The scene faded and they were once more back in Gallus' room. "This is how he has spent my Lover's Moon for the past two years. Would you have him face it

like that again? He believes he is unnatural, different, outcast and that he is unworthy of love while at the same time he loves so deeply it rivals even my own depth of the emotion. There are many here who call him friend, none of them that see him as anything but a talented and sweet abnormality. You are the only one that has ever treated him as he should be treated. Because one does not have a voice, does not make them unable to feel. Feel he does. Feels for you most profoundly. As I know you feel for him. I say again Little Gallus, your reticence causes him more pain. Will you allow this to continue?"

"Nay." Gallus was choked with emotion. Tonight was the Festival of the Lover's Moon, the virgins were probably already getting ready to have their cups blessed in preparation for a night designed for new lovers.

"Good. Don't fear it Gallus, this is and always was meant to be. He is for you, as you are for him. Love brings both joy and sorrow. But a long joy there will be before the sorrows little Gallus. Embrace it or forever lose it to fear." Mane said vanishing from the room, leaving Gallus to sort himself out.

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Once Gallus regained his composure he hurried along to the archive where Praduc was working, bent over an ancient and faded scroll, dutifully making an immaculate copy before the text was lost to time. Gallus paused and leaned against the doorframe, his strong arms crossed over his chest as he watched Praduc work. Absorbed in his task and brushing an errant lock of hair out of his eyes and leaving a streak of ink across his cheek in the process.

"So that's why there is always ink on your lovely face. Remind me to find you a hair clip." Gallus chuckled pushing off the frame of the door and walking across the room where Praduc smiled looking up from his task setting down his quill and signing.

:I've tried them. My hair has a mind of its own, it goes where it wishes, and it usually wishes to tickle my nose. I should cut it all off and save the trouble.: He signed as Gallus settled himself on the desk and reached down to wipe the ink away with gentle fingers.

"You'd better not cut it. I rather like the wild look you have about you." Gallus said moving to finger comb Praduc's hair back away from his face. "I like it immensely actually."

Praduc blushed, Gallus had never been so forward before. It was as if he was with an entirely different person and if Praduc didn't know better he'd have been positive that Gallus was flirting with him.

Gallus just grinned at the blush on Praduc's cheeks and he leaned forward to whisper in Praduc's ear. "Why aren't you getting ready for tonight? I will have no cup to drink from if you are not there."

Praduc's eyes went wide with shock and he sat there stunned as Gallus sat back on the desk, his face no longer a mask of gentle serenity, but that of a youth in love. Praduc's hands shook as he signed.

:You want to drink from my cup?:

"Yes. If you'll honor me with it."

:But, I'm...: He began but couldn't finish because Gallus cupped his hands in his own and just bent over to look Praduc deeply in the eyes, Gallus' deep and dark brown eyes were filled with a mixture of hope, sadness and the same loneliness that Praduc felt, they were two kindred spirits where it mattered most.

"You're absolutely wonderful and if others have told you differently they are blind and ignorant and not worthy of you. Will you honor me, your Gallus tonight?"

Praduc smiled and a few tears gathered in his eyes as he nodded once shyly. Gallus placed a chaste kiss on his cheek. "Until tonight then." He purred in Praduc's ear and his rich bass reverberated and the vibrations sent involuntary shivers down Praduc's spine. Gallus sat back smiling and winked before he removed himself from the archive.

Praduc practically danced around the room. The one person he loved most in the world, the most sinfully and ruggedly handsome brother in all of the order, his best friend, his confidant, his mentor, his teacher, the fuel for his most intimate dreams and the first and most truest love of his young life wanted him, specifically ASKED for him. Praduc was high as a kite in love as he tried in vain to finish his task.

When that failed he just packed everything up neatly and floated back to his rooms to bathe and change and try to make himself as presentable as possible. He was so nervous, great huge butterflies were having a battle royale in his stomach, but tonight he would have his heart's greatest desire and it was worth all the nausea. Gallus wanted him, wanted Praduc! He was in utter nirvana as he tamed his hair with lunar glories and dressed himself in virginal whites, finding a cup and heading down to where the other virgins would be gathering to receive the blessed mead to give to their loved ones and would be lovers.

Gallus wasn't fairing much better in the nerves department either as he stood grooming himself in his mirror. It had been years since he'd had a lover and had done exactly what Mane had accused him of, acted like a dotard ever since. He was a man in his prime. Twenty-three, built like a ton of bricks naturally, and he had to admit, he wasn't bad looking either as he inspected himself in the mirror as he shaved off the day's stubble from his chin and cleaned himself up.

"That's so much better. Look at my handsome little Gallus." Mane chuckled appearing over Gallus shoulder to look at him in the mirror.

"I feel like it for a change." Gallus grinned as he wiped off the residual soap from his chin and ran a comb through his long chestnut hair and tied it back with a spare leather lacing.

"Good. It's high time you started acting your age my young bull. You're going to make little Praduc faint looking like this, make sure to catch him when he crumbles." Mane winked

"You're good for an ego, thanks." Gallus chuckled putting on his robes, his broad chest peaking through as he belted it shut.

"This is my night Gallus. Tonight is my favorite night of the year and I've been waiting too long for my favorite novice to enjoy it properly. Make sure you are within earshot of the Virgin gathering. Praduc is going to need your support. It's time everyone began looking at him the way you do."

"Aye. I'm going now."

"Good. Bring him back here after, my gift to you both will be waiting." Mane said disappearing as quickly as he'd appeared. Gallus smiled and headed out to where the Virgin's were gathering in the joint chapel where morning masses took place.

Gallus hid himself behind the statues of Sol and Mane in the shadows, and he spied perfection not far away. Praduc was stunning to behold, absolute beauty in white and he was nervously fiddling with his cup, off isolated in a corner. Gallus could hear some of the whispered conversations around him and he was getting more furious by the moment. He'd had no idea the pain Praduc had endured even from the brotherhood.

One by one the virgins walked up to the altar where the virgin novices placed blessings on the wine and filled the virgin cups. It was Praduc's turn and Gallus held his breath.

"Oh Praduc, why do you come again? Love is not for the likes of one such as you..." The novice began and Gallus stepped out from his hiding place and strode forward coming to stand by Praduc's side, glaring anger in his eyes.

"Novice! By what authority do you claim to know the will of Mane and who is and who is not worthy of love?"

"Father Gallus, I? It's Praduc!" The novice gasped as his superior stood before him angrily.

"I know very well who stands before you, and it is his right to ask of the temple his mead on this night. I ask again, by whose authority do you deny him?"

"No ones Father... I just..."

"You just nothing! Fill his cup Novice!" Gallus ordered and the Novice hesitated. "I said to fill his cup! Novice, your duty is not to judge, your duty to this temple is to serve Mane's will. Mane's will is ALL virgins. Not just the ones you think are worthy. All are worthy in the eyes of Mane. Fill his cup and all the rest in silent contemplation on your actions and then report to your mentor." Father Gallus roared and the Novice so chastised by his superior did as ordered. Gallus turned to face Praduc and cupped his face in his hands.

"Praduc, you've suffered injustice, prejudice and scorn all your life long for nothing more criminal than having been born of a silent tongue. Know that I hear you, I see you, I understand you and I will allow the prejudice against you no longer, the intolerance will end tonight. I speak now in front of all present to bear witness here, I speak not as a priest of Mane, but just as your devoted Gallus. Praduc, beloved, know that in my heart I see you as the one I love most in this world. You are my friend, my brother, my confidant, my joy, my sorrow and my trusted companion above all others. Would you honor me with your love and let me drink from your cup?" Gallus' voice was tender and sincere and Praduc's tears flowed freely as he smiled up at Gallus and nodded, holding out his cup and lifting it to Gallus' lips.

Gallus bent his head to drink from the cup still held in Praduc's hands and after he drank the sweet honey wine, he took the cup from Praduc's hands and set it on the altar turning and cupping Praduc's face once more in his hands Gallus bent low and kissed him tenderly on the lips. Praduc's eyes drifted closed and he melted into the kiss his arms coming up to entwine around Gallus' strong neck and shoulders. Gallus' slowly ceased his gentle kiss and smiled as he scooped Praduc up into his arms and carried him purposefully out of the chapel in long, hard and quick strides.

Gallus was a man with a purpose and this Virgin in his arms he had spoken vows of love to in a chapel was not going to remain a virgin much longer. They were as good as wed in the eyes of Mane and Sol having exchanged such a meaningful declaration of love in a chapel before so many witnesses.

Gallus had done that on purpose. He had no desire for just a lover, he wanted a lover, a friend, a life-long equal partnership. He knew in his heart before, even without Mane telling him so, that Praduc was the one who would give him what he needed and in turn he would give to Praduc what he needed. He had just needed the confidence to admit it, and that was what Mane had given him. Confidence to follow his heart, and there was indeed joy when one followed ones heart.

Praduc was silent where he clung joyfully to Gallus' neck, his head buried in the crook of Gallus' shoulder as he was carried like he weighed nothing at all. Gallus had spoken vows of love in front of hundreds of people in the chapel. Praduc was no fool, he knew the portent of that, and he knew Gallus knew what he had done too. In the eyes of the temple, he was now bonded to Gallus in ways that made his heart sing with profound bliss. They were technically wed; they just skipped the formal ceremony, which was the only difference in the eyes of Mane and Sol. All that mattered to the Gods, were the vows, the ceremony itself was really unimportant. Praduc's heart and spirits were soaring high like an eagle in flight and he never wanted to come down to earth again.

Gallus carried him back to his rooms and kicked open the door so he didn't have to set Praduc down. Praduc laughed at Gallus' sudden determination and Gallus grinned with intent as he swept Praduc into his room and kicked the door shut behind him.

Gallus froze, his room had been transformed, candles twinkled merrily all around the room, giving off soft floral fragrances, the bed was sprinkled with lunar glory blossoms invitingly and in the center of the bed was a basket of cheese, fruit and wine, and topping it off there was a row of small glass bottles along the window ledge next to the bed that contained sweet smelling oils. Gallus gulped and Praduc audibly gasped and signed.

:You did all this for me?:

"I wish I could say I did love. This is from Mane himself." Gallus replied setting Praduc on his feet again.

:You really do talk to him like the others say you do.: It was a statement, not a question.

"Aye. All my life, it was Mane who kicked me in the ass this morning and ordered me to stop dragging my feet when it came to telling you how I felt." Gallus grinned as he leaned over to kiss Praduc sweetly. "I do love you and I'm sorry I took so long telling you so."

:Don't be silly. You loving me at all is my greatest joy Gallus. I have loved you always.: Praduc replied in sign, stepping closer and wrapping his arms around Gallus' waist and resting his chin on his broad chest smiling impishly up at Gallus.

"I see a very content lifetime ahead of me if you always smile at me like that, my lovely."

Praduc just winked and Gallus laughed wrapping his arms around Praduc's shoulders, pulling him close and burying his face in Praduc's hair that smelled of the glories still woven into the strands. "So beautiful you are to me. I feel unworthy of you suddenly. Like a boorish hound trampling in his mistress' flower beds."

Praduc snorted in laughter and pinched Gallus' sides making him jump and yelp before stepping back to sign grinning. :I told you before. You're no hound or ass, you are my bear, and they are allowed to be big and clumsy. It's part of their charm.:

"Your bear huh?" Gallus grinned, he did rather resemble a big grizzly bear at times when he hadn't shaved for a few days. Praduc's assessment and observation was wholly accurate.

:Aye, My bear: Praduc signed, stressing the 'my' in his sign.

"All yours." Gallus growled like a bear as he swept Praduc into his arms for a crushing hug and lips nipped playfully at Praduc's earlobes.

Praduc sighed and his bones turned to jelly and Gallus focused his attention on a spot just behind Praduc's ear as he maneuvered them closer to the bed. Once they stood by the bed, Gallus stopped his attentions for a moment and stood to his full height, he still dwarfed Praduc and practically the entire brotherhood in size. Praduc's eyes traveled the entire expanse of him, and his eyes were hungry and full of desire. Gallus smiled as he tugged the belt of his own robe free and let it fall to the floor, revealing a youth that was indeed one large expanse of male prowess. Broad shoulders and a chest the size of a barrel, lightly dusted with dark sable hair, which fell into a surprisingly lean and hard stomach considering the amounts of food Praduc had seen Gallus eat. Apparently food turned straight into muscle when Gallus ate, Praduc was more than pleased with the view. A line of dark hair that began at his navel and drew the eye like an

arrow downward made Praduc moan involuntarily. Gallus was too handsome to be true, and all that gloriously massive bear of a man was all his, there wasn't an inch on that body Praduc didn't want to worship sinfully.

And he was going to worship his beloved, tenderhearted bear-man for the rest of his life.

Praduc couldn't resist, and he stepped closer, running his fingers up and over Gallus' chest, toying with the soft thatch of hair nestled between his pectoral muscles. Praduc made a purring noise in the back of his throat and Gallus chuckled.

"Whomever said you couldn't speak volumes, lied beloved. How do I get you to make that noise again?" Gallus groaned, the purr Praduc made had had an immediate reaction and had gone straight to his groin.

Praduc smiled devilishly and just raped Gallus with his eyes. He may have been a virgin, but the gaze was decidedly certain about what it wanted and it wanted Gallus. Praduc's hands traveled lazily lower, following the trail of hair and a single finger lightly traced the length of Gallus' quite evidently aching sex. Praduc purred again and the twitch of reaction under his finger made him laugh. "You are wicked. Just whom is seducing whom here?" Gallus laughed as well, hooking his fingers in the belt that held on Praduc's robes.

"You are decidedly over-dressed. You got your eye full, it's my turn beautiful." Gallus said with a tug of the belt and Praduc's robes pooled around his feet. Gallus groaned, his voice full of lust and desire. "Nothing so beautiful should be legal. By Manes' crown, you are breathtaking. I am suddenly glad the brotherhood seems to have been blind while I was gone. I feel suddenly quite possessive of you."

:I certainly do not object being the object of possession, if it is you I belong to my bear. Do I please you?:

"Beloved, look at me. It should be quite obvious how very much you please me." Gallus grinned moving to pick Praduc up and place him in bed. "And I am out of patience and am through with words, beloved, please let me love you."

:Forever.: Praduc signed and that was the last of their conversation as Gallus bent his head and captured lips in a searing kiss that robbed Praduc of his breath and quickened his heartbeat as those lips brought a passionate flush of heat to whatever patch of skin they touched. His neck, his shoulder, first one nipple then the next trailing down each inch until Praduc was purring and grunting unconsciously in bliss as Gallus obliterated coherent thought and reduced

Praduc's world into nothing more than emotional stimulation and erotic sensations that electrified the soul as much as the body.

Minutes that seemed like hours passed as Gallus kissed and nipped and gently coaxed forth the reaction he needed to see from Praduc. When Gallus moved and coated them both with some of the sweet smelling oil from the first bottle he could reach off the window ledge and then gripped both of their erections in his massive hands together and slowly stroked them in unison, Praduc's gurgling cry in the back of his throat as he shuddered in release made Gallus smile in smug satisfaction. Praduc was even more beautiful flushed with excitement and love.

Gallus gently urged Praduc onto his stomach, fingers intimately tracing slick circles around Gallus' objective. Praduc moaned into pillows and squirmed in oversensitized pleasure as Gallus pulled and stretched gently, determined that when he took the virgin before him, tonight would be remembered for the rest of his life with joy and not pain. Gallus was a large man, in all ways and if he didn't want to rip his smaller lover apart, taking his time was key.

He apparently was taking too much time when a hand slapped him blindly and it frantically signed :NOW!:

Gallus chuckled and trailed kisses up an arching spine. Resting his chin on prominent shoulder blades and whispering in the delicate shell of his ear. "Aye, now." Gallus said pushing slowly home.

Praduc gripped pillows and choked a cry as he pushed back against Gallus' intrusion, welcoming his lover within in almost desperate pleasure. Gallus' moan practically shook the rafters. He hadn't expected Praduc to push himself back and the pleasure from the surprise was almost too overwhelming.

A near frenetic pace was set and every time Gallus thrust, Praduc met him with equal force. They both were shedding years of loneliness in each other's embrace, their souls reaching out and clinging to one another in a love that knew no limits, no handicaps and no restraint. Bodies were gleaming with sweat in the flickering candlelight and breath came in ragged gasps and inhalations as they expended themselves in body, mind and spirit.

Gallus' fierce growl of Praduc's name echoed in the small room as he released in fierce and deep thrusts and then collapsed in a heap as every muscle screamed in protest from such physical activity.

Praduc smirked as he was held cradled against a heaving chest and trailed fingers up a sweaty chest and signed :That was beautiful and you're out of shape.:

Gallus chuckled. "Aye, I feel like I've run a marathon and worth every ache at the moment beautiful. I didn't hurt you did I?"

:No, not at all. I'm not made of glass you know.:

"So I have learned. Think you can whip me back into shape?"

:Absolutely.: Praduc smiled rolling on top of Gallus to place a long lingering kiss on his parched lips, while reaching for the basket that had tumbled off the bed and grabbing the bottle of wine. Gallus laughed as Praduc pried out the cork with his teeth and brought the bottle to Gallus' lips. He drank heartily and let out a satisfied breath before Praduc took a drink himself and then set the bottle on the window ledge.

"I needed that."

:I know. I can read you like a book most times.:

"I am sadly predictable." Gallus admitted and Praduc only winked.

:You managed to surprise me enough this morning so not wholly predictable. I like the occasional surprise.:

Gallus just grinned. "You manage to surprise me on a daily basis. It's my turn once in a while I suppose. Now come here beautiful, I want you closer at the moment."

:My pleasure.: Praduc replied crawling back into Gallus' arms where they nestled together under the blankets and Gallus idly played with Praduc's fingers as the candles guttered out and the full moon shining in through the window sent the colors of the glass bottles dancing across their linens and skin. It was in this peaceful sated silence they drifted to sleep, Gallus wrapped around Praduc from behind as they spooned together in the narrow bed technically only designed for one man, and a normal sized man. Gallus was nowhere near normal and his feet dangled off the end and he was perched on the edge trying to give Praduc as much room as possible.

They would need a bigger bed and soon. Gallus had no intention of sleeping alone again.

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Gallus cracked open an eye to see Praduc still sleeping soundly, but a presence other than his lover had awakened him. Mane was there beside the bed, grinning at him. "Now that was beautiful."

"Did you watch us?"

"Naturally. I watch every body. Yours was particularly satisfying. I am pleased."

"So am I." Gallus smiled and kissed a sleeping brow beside him.

"He's quite beautiful. He reminds me of my Endymion. He was fey of beauty and impish of nature too. He will make you happy."

"He already has. Thank you for kicking me in the pants."

"You just needed confidence in yourself. I just gave a push, you did the rest on your own. Now then I am off to sleep, don't forget tradition today." Mane said picking up the discarded white robes on the floor and giving them a shake. They both turned blood red and two wreath crowns of red roses appeared and he set them on the nearby table. "To symbolize the blood of the virgin spilt last night. He gave you the most precious of gifts, himself. Today you must show your appreciation of his gift."

"Aye, I know. Spoil him rotten and wait on him hand and foot all day." Gallus grinned, he didn't have to be told, he knew tradition after all, he taught it. The day after the lover's moon, there would be many who had worn white the night before wearing red today. Their chosen mates also wearing red since they were the ones who had spilt the metaphorical and in some cases actual blood, Gallus wouldn't be alone in acting like a lovesick fool waiting on his beloved's whims today. It was a poor trade off for the virgin actually, there was nothing Gallus could do that would equal the gift he'd been given. But he'd certainly try.

Mane smiled and leaned over and kissed Gallus' brow and then Praduc's. "Long joy to you both, I bless your union and approve." Mane said fading from sight as Praduc opened his eyes and his hand flew to his brow.

"Mane kissed you and gave us his blessings." Gallus said and Praduc turned sleepy eyes toward Gallus.

:It felt like warm summer rain on my skin.: Praduc signed and Gallus nodded.

"Mane is warmth. His kisses always tingle the skin." Gallus replied placing his own kiss on a Praduc's brow.

:I like yours better. I hope Mane doesn't mind.:

"I don't think he does. Thank you beloved."

:I love you my Bear:

Gallus chuckled at the new nickname Praduc had taken to signing at him, he decidedly liked it greatly "I love you too dearest. Now come on, I get to spoil you rotten all day now. I say we start with breakfast then it's up to you what we do today."

:Find a bigger bed for starters. You're about to fall out of this one.: Praduc chuckled unfolding himself out of bed and looking with shock at the red robes and rose crowns. :Mane again?:

Gallus nodded and picked up Praduc's robe and held it open for him to slip into and then he turned and placed the wreath of roses atop Praduc's hair. "Beautiful, I feel so damn proud and profoundly lucky right now I could burst."

:You're so full of honey. You really are a bear!/: Praduc laughed standing on his tip toes to place a kiss on the end of Gallus' nose. :I'm starving, you?:

"When am I not?" Gallus winked pulling on his own robes and balancing his wreath on his head before offering his arm to Praduc and together they walked toward the hall as first mess bell rang.

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*Series Title: Le Storie Del Sole e Dalla Luna*  
*(Stories of the Sun and the Moon)*

*Book II: I Servi Fedeli Del Dio Della Luna*  
*(The Faithful Servants of the Moon God)*

**Chapter Number: Four**

**“Joy & Sorrow”**

*Author: D. Sanders*

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The moment Gallus with Praduc on his arm entered the mess, the entire congregation of Priests, acolytes, novices and everyone else in attendance stood from their seats and applauded, whistled, cheered and cat called. It seemed news of Gallus’ vows to Praduc the night before had been the hot topic of conversation all night and morning and Gallus laughed and rubbed his neck with a guilty expression on his face as he was caught off guard by their reception. Praduc was chuckling and shaking his head in silent laughter.

Father Fiamma strode over and took both their hands. “I hear there were vows spoken and witnessed last night, I can see said vows were consummated, I wish you both a long life filled with happiness. Congratulations on your union from the bottom of my heart. I am filled with joy for you both.”

“Thank you.” Gallus smiled, his arm around Praduc’s shoulders. Praduc only nodded and smiled, his arm looped around Gallus’ waist. They both looked exceedingly happy and content.

Father Garris, the head priest walked over to the pair, his ancient eyes filled with mirth. He carried a basket of fresh bread still steaming from the oven, fresh fruit, cream and cheese and indicated the pair should be seated as he laid the small feast before them and then fished a pair keys out of his pocket. “The southern tower above the archive. Father Durkin wishes you to have it with his blessings. You both will require larger living accommodations and it’s only been an empty storeroom for ages. Father Bendis and Brother Cadrac have already enlisted their students to clean it out for you and I have ordered you furniture from the town, it should be delivered this afternoon. Congratulations from the brotherhood. I am sure Mane is pleased.” Father Garris said with a wink and Gallus chuckled.

“Aye. He has given his blessing.” Gallus replied, his connection to his God was no secret, Father Garris who also shared the intimate connection with Sol nodded knowingly. No one doubted these two actually spoke to their gods like no other priests in the orders. If Garris or Gallus said it was Mane’s or Sol’s will, no one questioned them.

“As does Sol. When the brother’s agree, there is divine blessing.” Garris said patting Praduc’s hair. “I dare say we have been cruel to you when trying to be kind. I have heard from Father Mundis this morning that his Novice denied you

for years. Child, I apologize from the bottom of my heart. Why didn't you tell your mentors?"

Praduc sighed, he didn't have his wax board so he signed to Gallus who translated. "He says that he didn't want to be a burden. He was grateful just being here. It seemed petty to complain when he also saw himself as being unworthy." Gallus leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Never unworthy beloved."

"I agree child. And if we made you feel so then it is time we change. For starters, what is this communication you two have come up with?"

"It's called sign-language Father. I learned it in the capitol. It was created by Father Mordrac who was deaf from birth and he and his mentor created the symbols and left a record I uncovered in the capitol archives."

"I think this should become a voluntary curriculum that I encourage whole heartedly. I would like very much to become a student myself. There are a few children in the village who are either mute or deaf I would see their families educated in this as well. Gallus, Praduc would you mind teaching this class twice a week?"

Praduc nodded enthusiastically and Gallus smiled. "We'd be honored to. We had hoped to teach this to others eventually."

"I'll place the class sign-up sheet on the central board. Classroom four is vacant Third hour after mid-day, first and fourth days of the week. That, I think, will not conflict with any of your other classes or your archival duties."

"No, no conflicts. Thank you Father."

"Thank you for opening eyes, both of you. Handicaps are only that if we allow them to be. Now I will leave you both to get on with your day. Might I suggest the lakeside? Quite romantic for picnics so I've been told." Garris winked before turning and leaving the couple alone only to be replaced by Durkin and Bendis and a myriad of others offering congratulatory wishes and token gifts for the new union.

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"PRADUC!!! Why is there a DUCK in our Bed?!" Gallus cried as he walked into his room and stopped short seeing yet another wild animal using his linens as a surrogate home.

Praduc came in smiling and shaking his head picking up the wounded bird and moving it off the bed. :Be glad it didn't mess.:

"I'll give you mess. Twenty-years and I have YET to get used to your menagerie."

:At least it's a duck this time and not a snake.:

"You promised me no more creepy-crawly things." Gallus shivered, remembering intimately the garden snake in his bed and it being decidedly too close to his naked manhood for comfort several years earlier.

:And so far I've kept my promise. I keep those in the pens outside.: Praduc winked as he went from hanging cage to cage feeding the various birds he was tending so he could release them again. The tower was always noisy with chirping, crowing and barking, as three dogs came lumbering in to greet Gallus.

He didn't mind the dogs at all, in fact he had been the one to bring them home to Praduc after a trip to the local town, a local was giving away free puppies and Gallus couldn't choose so took all three home to Praduc. Truth be told, he tended to spoil them more than Praduc did. The two ginger cats came and went as they pleased and the rest of the animals were all wild or livestock and just temporary residents from time to time.

"Where's Timon?" Gallus asked after his novice whose room door was open and he was nowhere to be seen, Praduc grinned.

:Silly. What's day is it?:

"Oh I forgot. Did you make him presentable?"

:He looked beautiful, and so nervous. He's going to give his cup to Andes tonight:

"They're already attached at the hip, I don't foresee Andes refusing. For a Sun Novice, he's as monogamous as a lunar. Hey, that means we're alone tonight."

:Aye.: Praduc said moving to wrap his arms around Gallus' neck.

"Is the door locked?"

:Aye.:

"Happy Anniversary, Beloved." Gallus grinned and shoed the dogs and the duck out of his room as he scooped Praduc up and kicked the door shut behind him, he was in far better shape at forty-three than he had been at twenty-three. Praduc had indeed whipped him back into shape and he was going to show his beloved how his efforts paid off.

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Gallus sat by the bedside holding a frail hand in his own. The sickness that had swept through the village and order that winter was claiming far too many, Praduc was no longer young, and he'd always been delicate of build. At sixty and seven the illness had settled into his chest and his rasping breath made Gallus ache to be able to do more to ease his beloved's suffering.

They'd been together fifty-years, the best years of Gallus' life. At Seventy-three, and having spent the majority of his life with this man, he could not imagine life without Praduc, he was his constant, his companion, his life. He could not lose him.

:Bear, it's alright dearest. Don't grieve.: Trembling fingers signed.

"Like hell I won't. Praduc you can't leave me. I love you."

:I love you too Bear. It's my just my time.:

"Don't, don't say it beloved."

:It must be said bear. I love you, I've always loved you. I see Mane, he's here, he's beside you now. You will never be alone beloved.: Praduc's eyes closed and he took one last shuddering breath, his fingers signing for one final time. :I love you.:

"PRADUC! PRADUC!" Gallus' entire world collapsed in that moment. His heart screamed in anger and pain and the most agonizing sorrow as he clutched his life-ling love to his chest and rocked to and fro, utterly lost.

"Little Gallus, he is at peace."

"Why?! WHY!? Take me too, I'm older! It should be me!"

"No little Gallus. Now is not your time. You are needed for greater things. I told you there would be a long joy before the sorrow. That is the price of love. Would you have gone without the joy to avoid the sorrow?"

"No." Gallus wept into blond hair now mostly gray. Green eyes forever closed.

"No. Look up little Gallus." Mane ordered and Gallus turned up red-rimmed eyes to see a spirit standing beside Mane. It was Praduc as he had looked at seventeen, beautiful and smiling.

"I love you Gallus, my Bear. I'll be waiting for you." The apparition spoke, a tender voice in a lilting tenor. It leaned over and kissed Gallus' brow, laying a ghostly hand on his cheek before he faded into mist.

Gallus sobbed with a gut wrenching ache in his soul as the other priests, oblivious to Mane's actual presence in the room moved to comfort Gallus and pull the shroud over Praduc's still form, the sickness struck the very young and old without mercy and the death bell tolled another victim that night.

Everyone would mourn the passing of Gentle, fun-loving Praduc. The Silent Brother of wisdom, as the novices tended to call him over time. Candles were laid on the altars of both the sun and the moon and prayers for Praduc's spirit and Gallus' heart were raised to the heavens.

Gallus couldn't bear to sleep in his bed that night; instead he lay cradled against Mane's chest like a babe in the temple as he wept and mourned his devastating loss.

It had taken many months for Gallus to get over his grief to where he could live normally again. His mourning continued for the rest of his life and every night before bed, Gallus lit a candle that always burned on the altar for his beloved Praduc.

Gallus was bent with age, arthritis in his joints and taken the once tall and broad youth and crippled him into a hunched but still kindly man. He'd been head priest of the brotherhood forty-seven years, the longest term of service the order had ever known. He had to walk with a cane to support his aching knees and at ninety and one to have lived this long at all baffled him, but Mane insisted that he was still needed and had summoned him to the temple where he would finally learn why Mane had kept him close all these years.

Endymion had been reborn, and it fell to Gallus to protect the newborn mortal God in his youth.

Those that have read that tale know, that for sixteen years, Gallus was true to his vows to Mane. He raised and cared for Endys and at Endys' rebirth into Endymion, it was then Gallus, aged one hundred and seven was allowed his final rest.

Mane had repaid his most faithful of servants with a gift of eternal youth to live in paradise together forever. The entire order rejoiced when they saw the youthful and handsome spirit of Gallus be reunited with his long lost lover Praduc.

While they all had mourned his loss, they rejoiced knowing that the most benevolent master in the history of the order, was given such a gift from Mane.

Love eternal in the arms of the one person he had loved most in life.

Mane would simply say, Gallus earned it with his own two hands and nothing more. Great and good deeds would always be rewarded in kind.

--- End.