'Love,' said Stelmaria. Of all the women to fall in love with, it had to be the one that was already married.

The first time he saw her was at the King's New Year's Eve Ball. He'd heard, vaguely, the Coulter had married, but it hadn't meant anything to him.

If he was frank with himself (and he always was), he wanted her. She was attractive; dark hair, willowy, elegant. There was something else about her too, something even Stelmaria couldn't pinpoint. But he wanted her.

He watched her that evening, and saw her charm all she spoke to, even the Queen, who was known to dislike modern, stylish women. Asriel admired the talent, but didn't approach her. Not that night.

***

He saw her three times more with her husband at functions, and it was then that he spoke to her.

On those nights, he discovered that she was a scholar, interested in similar fields to him, and they talked about all kinds of related things. She was intelligent, he was pleased to see. He despised stupid, shallow women. Her he admired even more.

It made him want her more fervently. Stelmaria watched her demon, the golden monkey, and he
watched the lady, but if they knew what he thought, they hid it well.

***

The next time he saw her was in the Royal Arctic Institute's Library. She was reading the book on the Aurora that he wanted. He sat and watched her read for some time, watched her delicate fingers turn the pages, admired her elegant shoulders, wondered at her silky hair. The golden monkey saw them watching eventually, then she turned around and smiled at him.

Stelmaria rumbled a caution as they approached. She asked him why he had been watching her. If he'd told her the full answer, it would have made for a very interesting conversation, but he did tell her about the book.

She smiled her intoxicating smile, and Stela pressed her head into his leg, suddenly shy.

'You'll just have to wait for it then, won't you?'

He knew, then, that she knew what he felt. She was teasing him, in a way unlike any woman before her.

As they left her in peace to read, he rested his hand on his daemon's head. 'She's quite something, isn't she?'

***

For the next six months he headed his expedition to the North, writing, exploring and learning more than he'd dared imagine. The rich, influential man that had left Britain arrived back twice as wealthy and three times more respected. He noted jealous looks from others in the King's council, even, though Stelmaria reproached him, Edward Coulter.

He saw her next unaccompanied at a lecture by Rusakov about his elementary particles. She listened, according to Stelmaria, as eagerly as he, and he sought her out later amongst the crowds while people drank wine and talked in hushed tones about these wonderful new discoveries.

If he'd known why she was interested in Dust, as it became known, if he'd known what she'd become later, he would have turned his back then, walked away, never spoken to her again.

But he didn't ask, and she didn't say, and so they discussed the lecture, the particles, his expedition...

In a moment of silence where they watched the other guests, the golden monkey gave a sudden screech and ran up to perch on her shoulder and bury his face in her neck. They looked at each other, and they both knew.

It was lucky he was staying opposite the hall. None of the guests noticed them slip out, and the staff were too smart to remember it.

***

The next two months passed in a whirlwind of hotel rooms, and snatched moments, but they were careful, for her husband was a formidable man.

But the time with her was worth the worry and the sneaking. One night he lay watching her sleep, and wondering. He had had many women before, and cared for them all, but he had never been so captivated, so attached. He found he desired conversation with her almost as much as love-making. He was confused, but it was sweet confusion.
'Love,' said Stelmaria lazily from the foot of the bed.

Love. Of all the women to fall in love with, it had to be the one that was already married.

Yes, but those two months were bliss.

***

He was going North again, but he had never before wished to abandon such a journey, and stay in London, close to her. But he did not give in to that temptation, though he spent his last night in Brytain with her, and they tried to make up for the three months he would miss.

Their dæmons awoke before them, and they were agitated but didn't know why. Asriel put it out of his mind as he stood on the deck of the ship, ready to embrace the joy of the North.

***

When he returned there was a messenger from her waiting for him. She had not written, they had agreed it was safer that way, but now she had sent only a short note with the messenger, giving him an address and asking that he come at once. He made arrangements with pleasure, ignoring Stelmaria's confused misgivings.

When he first entered the room it was to find her sitting on the bed with an uncharacteristically devastated expression. She barely acknowledged his presence.

'Marisa?'

She raised her beautiful head, and her eyes were red with tears.

'You're going to be a father, Asriel.'

What?

She got up and walked to the window, speaking almost to herself.

'A child, out of wedlock... A child, seeped in sin since birth...'

'Does he know?'

'Yes, but he thinks it's his, and I'm certain... Oh Asriel...'

He was not a sentimental man, but he felt a strange warmth spread through him. Stelmaria raised her head in surprise.

'I'll take it.' She spun, startled. 'If it resembles me, say that it died, and send it to me. I'll care for it.'

That's...' she considered. 'Yes, that -' The golden monkey gave a little scream and threw himself as far from her as he could get. She shuddered, but held her ground.

'Thank-you, Asriel.' And she dismissed him with a final nod of her head.

***

The child arrived in Oxfordshire just over six months later in the dead of the night. Mrs Costa brought his daughter before him.
'May I hold her?' She hadn't expected him to ask, judging by her reaction. What, did she think he didn't care?

He held the child, fascinated by the mix of himself and her in her tiny face. There was no chance of Coulter believing this was his child.

'She hasn't a name, My Lord.'

Then it was a good thing she was away from her mother, if that was how she treated her own daughter.

Stelmaria touched her nose to the child's mouse-daemon. 'Pantalaimon.'

He didn't ask her the meaning of the daemon's name. That was something that was simply not done.

He named the child Lyra, for the stars that guided him in his exploration.

Lyra and Pantalaimon.

***

He was hunting with friends when the stableboy rode up on a horse that had never been ridden that fast in its life.

'Lord Asriel... In the gyptian's cottage... Coulter...'

Lyra.

He turned his horse, urging her into a gallop, leaving his confused guests behind. Stelmaria ran beside him, voicing their rage.

Her could see the cottage and made to stop, but Stela ran on, screaming 'The Big House! The Big House!'

He reached it in seconds, leapt from the saddle and ran up the stairs. Coulter was at the base of the staircase already, pounding on the door of a servant's closet. Asriel could hear his daughter wailing.

'Coulter!'

The man turned, and there was spittle on his chin and madness in his eyes. He had a gun. Asriel fumbled for the knife at his belt. He'd dropped his bloody pistol. Coulter saw what he was doing and spat at him.

It didn't reach him, but it was enough. Stelmaria roared and leapt to fight the tiger-daemon as the two men engaged.

Coulter was strong and furious, but Asriel was even more so, and they fought hand to hand, each trying to control the gun. He lashed out and the thing went flying. Coulter dived after it and fired, the bullet grazing Asriel's ear as it whizzed past. He flung himself at his enemy, kicking and punching as Stelmaria scratched and bit. Then he threw Coulter off him and staggered to his feet with the gun.

Then a terrible pain pierced his heart, and he saw that the tiger-daemon had pinned Stela down and was digging her claws into her throat.

There was only one option. Asriel raised the gun and fired.
He saw her next in court, where her most prestigious skill was paraded before the judges without them even noticing.

He watched her lie so well that if he hadn't been present at the events she described, he would have believed her. He watched her lie with every cell in her body as she shortened their relationship, called him a seducer and a rapist, playing the innocent widow with all her skill. She denied him, she denied their daughter, even the golden monkey acted the part. As the deceptive bitch passed him after leaving the witness stand, she gave him a cold glare.

He hardened his heart against her.

End Notes

Of course, the title comes from the John Milton poem that inspired Philip Pullman. Comments much appreciated!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!