

Part Three of the Okal Rel Saga

PRETENDERS



A PRE-PUBLICATION LIMITED EDITION BOOKLET

a novel by

Lynda Williams

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Available from EDGE, September 2008

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AN IMPRINT OF HADES PUBLICATIONS, INC.
CALGARY

Pretenders
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Released: September, 2008

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Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing
An Imprint of Hades Publications Inc.
P.O. Box 1714, Calgary, Alberta, T2P 2L7, Canada

In house editing by Richard Janzen
Interior design by Brian Hades
Cover illustration by L. W. Perkins
ISBN-13: 978-1-894063-13-5

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Printed in Canada
www.edgewebsite.com

CHAPTER 1

Lost and Found

Into Exile - 175 Post Americ Treaty

The Green Hearth herald greeted Ev'rel with a look of pure shock. "You!" he cried in Gelack, registering his visitor's high rank in the pronoun.

Any other day Ev'rel might have laughed to see the poor man's dignity so overturned. Today she cared for nothing but getting past him.

Silver Hearth guards hovered uncertainly at her back, unsure of how to take charge of a prisoner so highly ranked. Not long ago, the Gelack Empire had been a toy her father dangled for her pleasure. Now she stood on Fountain Court under guard, seeking mercy at the door of the mentor she used to taunt with proof that she did not need to learn his harsh lessons.

Di Mon, the 103rd liege of Monitum, was her last hope.

Ev'rel shouldered past the disconcerted herald. Di Mon's errants sprang to attention and drew their swords.

Ev'rel had never feared a sword before. She had hated Di Mon's fencing lessons, down on Green Wedge below Fountain Court, but ever since Di Mon had told her about life on old Earth and Monatese theories about *Okal Rel*, she had felt nothing but contempt for the instruments of Sword Law. Now these weapons she thought of as stupid looked horribly lethal.

"Di Mon!" she cried, and humbled herself to beg. "Please! Let me see him!"

Silence fell hard, relieved only by her heaving breath, as the errants studied Ev'rel where she stood before them, trembling and barefoot, her black hair wild about her classic features and her face lit by a rising fever. Dark streaks soaked the front of her nightgown where her swollen breasts had begun to leak hours earlier, the warm milk gone cold enough to chill her.

She stood as still as she could, listening to the trickle of water sounds coming from the ivy-covered walls. The entrance hall was full of plants, some earthly green and the rest the dark turquoise of native life on Di Mon's homeworld of Monitum. The damp air, with its familiar smells, was a balm to Ev'rel's lungs.

Di Mon will save me, she thought.

"Take her to Liege Monitum," Di Mon's lead errant decided, putting up her weapon. "You can wait here," she informed the all-male Demish escort.

"Thank you!" Ev'rel gasped, elevating the errant to an equal with the pronoun to express her thanks.

The Monatese woman was not impressed. "This way, Immortality," she said, and led on.

Ev'rel followed her to the end of the ivy-lined hall and through a set of double doors that the herald held open. Inside was Azure Lounge, the first room of a series called the Throat. She looked about frantically for Di Mon, but the room was empty.

"He's in Ameron's old room, in Family Hall," the errant told her coolly.

Ev'rel nodded. The fever made the gesture feel out of control and exaggerated. She pressed her palm to her face and felt sweat there before hurrying to catch up with the errant. Glimpses of earth artifacts, old pictures and historical memorabilia flashed by her, reminding her that the Monatese valued history over literature; philosophy over hope; and diplomacy over war — all things she had learned from her Monatese mentor.

He is a fair man, she told herself, for courage. *He won't hold past mockery and high spirits against me. He knows I'd never harm my own baby!* The very thought of the lost infant heaved a raw sob into her throat.

“Immortality?” The errant stopped to see what was the matter with her.

Ev’rel swayed against a leather chair in the last room of the Throat, called Family Lounge, often used for entertaining intimates. She and Di Mon had taken lessons here. And in his library.

The errant touched her bare arm. “You’re hot,” she said with concern.

Ev’rel shook her head. “Please, take me to him.”

The errant took a knitted shawl from the leather chair and wrapped it about Ev’rel’s shoulders. It must have belonged to some servant or a Sevolite too lowborn to be sensitive, because the patterns in it leaped at Ev’rel with unmitigated simplicity, setting her teeth on edge. Di Mon had always liked to play such tricks on her, to prove to her she had a highborn’s navigational talent: an instinctive ability to discern complex patterns in star-scattered spacescapes while reality skimming through them. Ev’rel hated all such tricks — they made her dizzy. But she clung to the disturbing shawl today as if her life depended on it.

Family Hall intersected the Throat at a right angle. It was the deepest, safest part of Green Hearth, farthest from the spiral stairs that led up to Green Pavilion and the doors on Fountain Court that she had come through to get this far. Ev’rel wanted to feel safe here, but she had learned that all safety on Fountain Court was tentative. Property, here, could be guarded by nothing but swords, under Sword Law, and the social constraints of the Ava’s Oath to which all hearths of Fountain Court must answer. That was the core prerequisite to holding power. Transgressors died, disgraced, for breaking Sword Law. But Ev’rel trusted none of it, not since her father’s murder. Not when the half-brother who took her father from her ruled the empire.

She wanted Di Mon to be her new father, to forgive her everything and to shelter her. The need burned in her as physically as fever.

Seeing the door of the Ameron Room ajar ahead of her, Ev’rel could hold herself back no more. She broke into a run, leaving the errant behind in Family Hall.

Di Mon turned as she burst in. He had been standing in front of a portrait of Ev'rel's ancestor, Ameron Lor'Vrel of White Hearth. The historical Ava in the painting was a young man dressed in fencing gear who stood reading a book with his sword lying on the table in front of him. The portrait caught him in the act of glancing up, as if to greet a visitor. For some reason, perhaps because Ameron had always been the standard by which Di Mon judged her, Ev'rel's eyes fixed in mute appeal upon her ancestor.

The young Ameron had gray eyes and a lean, Vrellish build, just like Di Mon himself and all highborns who were racially Vrellish, but the resemblance between Di Mon and his idol ended there. Ameron's hair was a mop of chestnut brown — the Lorel color — and his sharp features were more pronounced, with a strong nose and a wide forehead.

Ev'rel felt no blessing in her ancestor's inquisitive stare. She fixed upon Di Mon, instead, who stared back at her, very much alive if unnaturally still. He had not expected to see her. He was not pleased about it, but he was not indifferent, either. She could see how it hurt him to see her like this.

Ev'rel would have given anything in that moment to force her way into his life. To seize a role, with him, in which she felt secure. On the heels of that longing, she suffered a pang of desire like a knife stabbing her.

"Ev'rel," Di Mon breathed, his tone encouraging her certainty of his concern.

She threw herself at his feet in a gush of tears and words. "Don't let them!" she begged, clutching at his legs. "Don't help them send me away into exile! You know I'm innocent! I loved Amel!"

Gently, he guided her up and sat down beside her on the bed. "You're feverish," he said, and touched her breast, sending lances of pain and passion through her. But his intent was clinical. "Milk fever," he concluded, and rose, "I'll fetch Sarilous."

"No!" she cried, rearing up to grasp him about the waist.

He tolerated the familiarity, touching her hair in an awkward attempt to be comforting.

"I loved Amel," she wept, indulging in her honest grief. "My beautiful, crystal-eyed baby."

"I know," he said curtly.

She clambered onto her knees, afraid to take her hands off him. His male smell was intoxicating. He had tried to explain that to her, as well. How she could never really be a Demish princess when her mother had been a Pureblood Vrellish warrior. She had to come to terms with her Vrellish nature, he'd always said. Learn to fight. Always he spoke about fighting, never the desire that was now consuming her.

"Then ... you know," she floundered, trying to reconcile his tone and words. "You know I didn't do it!"

"Do what?" he said, his voice dry and bitter. "Order your *gorarelpul*, Arous, to hide Amel? And be careful — do not try to lie to me."

She clutched harder, tears cascading down her fever-spotted cheeks. "Yes! But to protect him from Delm!" she wailed.

"Maybe that was your reason," Di Mon said, still implacable, "maybe not. Delm says it was because you wanted to avoid a genotyping that would prove Amel was not his son, but Arous's. We will never know now. Amel is lost and could be dying as we speak, and Arous is conveniently dead."

Ev'rel gave a cry, stabbed to the heart by his cruel words. She pressed herself to him, hugging him and wanting him in every way. "No, no, no," she wept.

He pulled her from him with force and struggled to make her lie down, saying things about the fever and threatening to fetch his *gorarelpul* medic, Sarilous. But she did not want that kind of help. She wanted him. And fever had not sapped her Pureblood strength.

"Don't hate me!" she begged. "I didn't give Arous the overdose of Rush! It was Delm! I swear! I swear!"

His very resistance excited her. Their struggle became violent, but she — despite his efforts — was untrained. He struck her in the ribs. The pain snapped something emotional inside of her. She fought back with wild strength,

as if she could solve everything by getting him down, beneath her, and having what she wanted.

She fastened her mouth on his, tasting blood, and for a heady instant she felt as if she'd tapped into a passion equally denied and violent. Then a sharp knee heaved her up, a hard hand slammed across her mouth, and her strength became useless against a genius for body physics that she had never mastered.

She came to herself on the floor, at his feet, staring up at him breathless and humbled.

"You are not guilty of all Delm accuses you of, perhaps," Di Mon ground out at her. "But Amel was Arous's child. You hated Delm. So you used a *sla* sex drug on a conscience-bonded commoner — on Arous — a man your stupid father let you take from the *Gorarelpul* College for no better reason than his good looks. Did your father know that you were disappointed when Arous proved to be impotent due to pain training? Did you even care that Arous was a brilliant student, slated to become a college father? Did anything matter to you except his body, Ev'rel?"

"I didn't — " she started, and gulped as he yanked her to her feet.

"Kill him?" he finished. "No, but you gave Delm the idea. You made it possible for him to implicate you with your *slaka's* corpse. He knew that using Rush would implicate you when I investigated."

His grip bit into her upper arms, making her gasp.

"You are Vrellish inside, oh yes!" he said. "But in the wrong way! Did I never teach you man-rape is a crime even in Red Reach, Ev'rel! When I taught you Green Hearth's history, of the commoner-Sevolite alliance that defined its origins, did I fail to make it clear that the humans we call commoners are not toys to be used for a Sevolite's dishonorable pleasures! Should I have made that an explicit part of the curriculum!"

He shoved her away from him.

She staggered back, bumping into the bed behind her. Ameron's portrait looked down at her over Di Mon's shoulder, the two of them united in a supernatural blow of condemnation.

"You disgust me," Di Mon told her. "If you were not the empire's last female Pureblood, I would see you slain, not exiled."

"You!" she groped for anger to sustain herself, panting with injured pride and indignation. "You would condemn me, when you voted with the rest of them to bind me to a ten-child contract with Delm — the brother I hate — the brother who had our father slain!"

He wavered then. "I am not proud of my part in that, Ev'rel. I could not blame you, as a person, if you chose to thwart the empire's need for heirs and bared the door to Delm. But what you did with Arous — it was *sla*, Ev'rel. Wrong and obscene. Think about that in your exile and learn to be a Vrellish woman in a more wholesome way!"

"If I do," she begged, stinging from the lash of his anger, "would you forgive me? C-could we start over?"

"I will fetch you a medic," he said coolly. Then he turned and walked away from her.

Hopeless desperation tried to swallow her and failed. Outraged pride and a pilot's will vomited her back to face the exile awaiting her.

"I enjoyed Arous!" She shrieked at Di Mon's retreating back. "I enjoyed the fact he hated pleasing me!"

He didn't give her the satisfaction of a flinch, but he slammed the door behind him hard enough to jar the portrait of her venerated ancestor.

Amel Found - 16 years later

"Amel?"

The name failed to claim Von's attention. He was too busy peering out the window at the wonders of a living planet, visible at last through the fluffy clouds of Barmi II's rich atmosphere. He had never seen anything like this on the barren surface of Gelion. There were streams and fields and ribbon-thin roads with a few tiny vehicles moving on them. In some of the fields there were animals and most of the vehicles looked as if they were being drawn by horses, although their shuttle was still too high up for Von to be sure. He had never seen a real horse before except in pictures. He was less interested in the long trucks that

must have been powered by *rel*-batteries or some locally generated fuel with eco-safe waste products.

It was all so amazingly beautiful he forgot to breathe regularly.

"Are you doing all right, Amel?"

He smiled at the big blond woman sitting opposite him with clouds streaming past the window at her back.

"Air—ee—yum," he said aloud, and laughed.

"Yes?" she asked, puzzled by the way he emphasized each separate syllable.

"It's in your name," he told her, pointing towards the window. "Air." *And yumminess*, he added to himself.

They were speaking the old Earth language, English, for the sake of his nervousness concerning Gelack pronouns. In Gelack, he was still prone to talk like a commoner, although he understood he wasn't supposed to anymore. Ayrium indulged him with English. She had been wonderful to him about everything.

Von looked out the window again the moment they were out of the clouds. They were closer now. The patchwork of fields below him looked like a scene from one of the Demish storybooks he loved.

"Oh, Ayrium," he gushed, "no wonder it's *okal'a'ni* to even dream of hurting green worlds for absolutely any reason at all! No wonder there is Sword Law, instead, and *Okal Rel*."

Ayrium's mouth spread in a generous smile, warm golden highlights in her short hair. "Mom," she said, "is going to love you."

'Mom' was the infamous mutineer, Perry D'Aur, who had taken the world below from the last liege of Barmi, a reputedly dreadful ruler who also happened to be one of Amel's relatives.

One of my relatives, Von reminded himself, and felt his anxieties regroup to mass in his chest.

Ayrium squeezed his arm again before she sat back. She was large and strong, but shapely in the womanly, Demish way, with sky-bright eyes and a sunny disposition. There was just no denying her sexiness, but Von felt bad about noticing. He preferred to think of her as a big sister. There

had been too many lovers in his short life and only one dearly loved sister, even though he now knew the girl he'd grown up with was nothing like him. He was Amel, a Sevolute Pureblood and heir to the empire, as well as a potential Soul of Light sacred to the gentle sect of *Okal Rel* known as *Okal Lumens*.

It was all pretty daunting for a boy raised in seclusion on Gelion, who had been earning his living in the sex trade for the last three years.

Ayrium leaned over to point. "There's the palace!"

Von peered down at a U-shaped building coming up fast, below. A junkyard of agricultural vehicles filled what might once have been a garden at its back. Beyond that lay the runway they were headed for.

"We still call it the palace," said Ayrium, "although we don't keep it up like one. Mom runs the Purple Alliance from there."

He looked at his big, sunny savior. "I thought you were Liege Barmi, Ayrium."

"I am!" she said, grinning. "I have to be, to keep up appearances for Fountain Court. They don't recognize the Purple Alliance, just my title. Mom can't be Liege Barmi because she's just a Midlord and Liege Barmi has to be highborn." She paused, studying him with a worried expression. "You do know, I hope, that you have a better claim to Barmi than either Mom or I. I've been thinking about that ever since Dad insisted I bring you here, and how Mom says she would never have taken Barmi II away from a deserving liege to start! Not that we're going to give it back or anything!" she added quickly. "Well, if things go the way Dad hopes, at court, maybe one day I can swear to you as Ava, which will fix it all up." She grinned. "Mom wants to be respectable again, so I think she'd like that."

It took Von five seconds to grasp that this person who was not him ... not really ... not yet, this Pureblood Prince Amel, was a threat to his new friend and the other people who had taken over Barmi II. The realization coalesced his free-floating anxiety, bringing on one of the fits he could not control.

His memory locked on a trauma in his past and his senses took him there. For an instant he was back inside the chamber called a visitor probe with his brain interfaced to a half-living computer called an arbiter.

"Amel? Amel!" Ayrium was out of her seat belt and kneeling on the floor beside him.

"It's what the Reetions did to me," he told her, not knowing who else to confide in but afraid to admit too much. "It makes me clear dream — except I don't remember past lives like a real clear dreamer does. I relive bad memories."

Ayrium was looking at him with such open pity that he felt ashamed. "It's no big deal," he tried to convince them both.

"Sure," she said gamely, but he could tell she knew it was a lie.

She got back into her seat to prepare for landing while Von tried not to think about anything at all. Instead, he let himself enjoy the feel of touching down on the ground.

As soon as they came to a complete stop, Ayrium was up. "Let's not keep Dad waiting!" she said, taking his hand.

He went ahead of her down the aisle to where their pilot was busy deploying a ramp. But the moment he caught sight of the people outside his hands locked on the frame of the shuttle door.

People of all kinds, from workers in overalls to Sevolutites wearing swords, were watching from windows or standing in one of the many doorways lining the machine-choked courtyard. Some stood on balconies peering down. The net effect was as if a giant hand had squeezed the palace to make people pop out of it through every window and door. Even more alarming were the two people waiting to greet him formally: one a large man who had to be Ayrium's father, D'Ander, and the other a small woman who would be the liege-killer, Perry D'Aur.

Ayrium put a hand on Von's shoulder and leaned forward to whisper encouragement. "Inhale! Breathe the air! Go on. You'll find it very different from what you're used to underground on Gelion."

Von closed his eyes and felt the air on his face. It felt cool, moist and wonderful in his lungs, full of smells that spoke of plants, people and the machines parked in the ruined garden of the courtyard.

He opened his eyes again and tilted his head up in amazement at the way the sky went up and up, blocking out the blackness of space beyond: no ceiling, no walls and no bonds.

"It's beautiful," he said, awestruck.

"You're beautiful!" said Ayrium with a laugh. "It's a joy the way it just pours off you."

Fortified, Von found the courage to look down.

Prince D'Ander was gloriously Golden from head to toe, with gently curling locks of hair the same color as Ayrium's, a handsome face with a pronounced dimple in the chin, a chest encrusted in designs that proclaimed an illustrious heritage, and a jewel-hilted sword. He was busy scanning the people-laden balconies and doors with a look of ferocious displeasure that gave Von qualms.

"Don't be frightened of Dad," Ayrium coaxed. "You are his miracle. He couldn't be more protective if you were Ameron himself, back from his last jump — and that's saying a lot! Dad is nuts about Ameron. It's a toss up, in fact, whether he's more devoted to Ameron or the Golden Emperor back on the Golden home world of Demora. Of course," she added, leaning so close her clean breath tickled Von's ear lobe, "there is something those two worthies have in common. Neither one is likely to contradict Dad's opinion of how best to serve them; that might be what makes them so attractive to him."

She freed a hand to point at the short, dark-haired woman beside Prince D'Ander.

"That's Mom," said Ayrium. "They're not married. Dad gifted me to her in the Vrellish fashion twenty-five years ago. I'll run you through the niceties some other time. For now, the gist is: my parents are still allies but not lovers. You don't want to screw up on that front because Dad's got a wife on Demora and plays by Demish rules of romance. Fortunately, Mom's not the kind to be broken up

about such stuff. She's got a husband of her own, named Vrenn, or rather a Vrellish-style *mekan'st*. She's been known to look elsewhere, and Vrenn certainly does. End of briefing," she concluded, giving him a gentle nudge.

Von's gaze slid from the formidable Golden prince to Perry D'Aur. She was dressed in work pants and a close-fitting tank top with a well-worn flight jacket worn loosely over it. She looked neither old nor young, but weathered enough that she couldn't be highborn. Von remembered hearing she was a Midlord, the lower of the two classes of nobleborn, which made her tougher and longer-lived than any commoner, but not regenerative like D'Ander and Ayrium.

And Amel, he reminded himself. He tried to think *me* instead of Amel, but still couldn't.

A breeze ruffled Von's hair, blowing it across his eyes. He clapped a hand to his head, surprised, and tucked the stray hair away behind his ear. Then he took a deep breath and went down the ramp.

"— didn't tell a soul you were bringing Amel here, I swear!" Perry was explaining to D'Ander. "Rumor spreads faster than highborns can fly, that's all. Besides, you had better get used to him being exposed to the crass curiosity of my irregulars if you want to stash him here while you figure out —"

"Look, Mom!" Ayrium interrupted, pulling Amel around in front of her. "See what I found! Everyone's missing heir."

Von managed a watery smile.

D'Ander's handsome face erupted in a much more extravagant one.

"Immortality," the Golden prince addressed Von with lofty formality. "I give you Perry D'Aur, a nobleborn of the Blue Demish. And this," he introduced Von to Perry, "is the Pureblood Prince Amel, Soul of Light, and future Ava of the Gelack Empire!"

Von's ears buzzed. He heard voices speaking in Reetion — the language he had acquired by force inside the visitor probe; then he came to himself braced in Ayrium's strong hands.

"S-sorry," he stuttered, a cold lump of fear in his stomach. He dared not use a pronoun because, if he did, he would have to decide how to cope with being up-spoken by the liege of Golden Hearth and Sword Champion of all Demora.

"He's fragile as glass!" exclaimed D'Ander. "The least stress and he has one of his episodes!" He seemed oddly pleased about it.

Perry, on the other hand, fixed Von with a dark blue stare that opened him lengthwise, like a knife, as if she could see perfectly well he was only a commoner courtesan playing fine sentiments.

"Why don't you take him to Demora?" she asked D'Ander, applying the form of 'him' fit for a Pureblood, but with something closer to resentment than reverence about it.

"I will, of course," D'Ander floundered, "when the time is right. At the moment there are still, uh, concerns there about his ... mmm ... career, while a commoner."

"Tough sell back home, is it?" asked Perry. "A Soul of Light surviving as a prostitute for three years?"

"Once he's Ava —" D'Ander began to argue.

But Von could take no more. He bolted past Perry, shied from D'Ander, and took off across the machine yard, vaulting the first obstruction he encountered. Rough, uneven engine parts stung his soft palm as he cleared a broken-down car. He landed cleanly only by good luck.

This is no way to behave! he thought. Not that there was a Demish handbook of etiquette to cover this situation, but he knew what he was doing was futile and possibly dangerous.

A dirt mover with a high cab for the operator loomed up. Von sprang inside with a bound. The seat was wide and padded at the back. He threw his head against it, panting without being tired.

Soon he became aware of a lone figure walking towards him.

It was Perry D'Aur. Watching her approach, he noticed how the nipples of her small breasts asserted themselves

against her tank top and frowned at himself with annoyance. This was not the way he wanted to react!

Perry trudged over and set one calloused hand on his dirt mover. "May I come up?" she asked, addressing him in *pol*-peerage, as if they were both commoners.

The low-stress, grammatical fiction calmed him down. "Of course!" he said, blushing, then formally accepted her offer by working in a pronoun to match her grammar. "I would like that."

Perry heaved herself up and settled into the seat beside him. "Must have been fun being a courtesan on Gelion," she said, straightfaced, adding an appreciative grin, "for your clients." She paused while he registered the compliment, then asked, "Vrellish women, weren't they?"

"Mostly," Von said, to be agreeable, then decided to tell the truth. "Actually, half of them were Demish ladies."

Perry raised an eyebrow. "Sexual workout one night, flattering chit-chat over tea the next?"

"Something like that," he said, "but you'd be surprised about some Demish women ... particularly the widows. And Vrellish women talk sometimes." He considered. "Usually afterwards."

Perry chuckled. "I know what you mean. I have a Vrellish *mekan'st*."

He nodded. "Vrenn," he remembered.

"Not exactly a lady, am I?" she said with a good-natured smile. "I served in the Blue Demish fleet, led a coup against my liege over two decades ago, have a Vrellish lover ... and there's Ayrium, the bastard."

"I like Ayrium," Von enthused.

"Me too." Perry shifted herself to get comfortable. She didn't mind bumping him to do it. Her casualness felt companionable.

"D'Ander helped me out in a tough spot," she gave him her own version of the briefing Ayrium had offered earlier. "So yes, we were lovers. And Ayrium did the trick, for the Vrellish at least, at court." She paused to rub an itch along one side of her nose. "In any case, D'Ander and I were *mekan'stan* for a while — regular lovers in the Vrellish

fashion — and we get along all right still, as allies, even now he's married. But he's D'Ander, Sword Champion of the Golden Emperor and liege of Golden Hearth on Fountain Court, while I'm not even sure I have a title. It's Ayrium who is Liege Barmi."

"I know," said Von, trying to be helpful, although he wasn't sure where this was going at all.

"My own people call me Cap," said Perry, "whether or not they ever served under my command." She stirred in discomfort. He was patient.

"Look," she told him, bluntly, "the point is I'm not up to messing with who gets to be the next Ava." She looked at him seriously. "That's something you need to understand."

He had no idea what she meant by saying all this to him. He was busy resisting his curiosity about her breasts, instead, and wishing he could turn his sexual awareness of women on and off. He wasn't a courtesan anymore. He could afford to be discriminating, maybe even fall in love. There had been one woman in particular, a Reetion he'd met named Ann

But I'll never see Ann again, he remembered, not if Prince D'Ander wants to make me Ava.

"I think," he said, "I'm going to find it hard to adjust."

"I'd say that's a safe bet," said Perry D'Aur. Then she added deliberately, "Pureblood Amel."

"Can't you call me Von?" he asked.

"No."

She climbed down out of the cabin and put up a hand to help him down. He accepted it, although he didn't need help. He enjoyed the firm feel of her hand.

"You are Amel," she said, switching her grammar to match. "You have to start thinking like a highborn."

Something in the way she said it made the warning clear. He nodded dumbly, half afraid and half determined to survive.

Amel, he told himself as Perry led him by the hand back to where D'Ander waited with Ayrium. I have to learn to be Amel.

"Ayrium will show you to your room," Perry said as she transferred him back to her daughter. D'Ander looked inclined to argue before Perry headed him off.

"You have to give the boy a chance to relax," Amel heard her telling D'Ander as Ayrium led him into the palace.

Inside, they were met by a large-boned, lanky woman with gray eyes and short black hair.

"All clear, Ayrium," she said, with a casual salute.

"Thanks, Maverick!" Ayrium called back as she hustled Amel up a sweeping flight of stairs off the main entrance.

The room he'd been assigned was on the second floor.

"Big, four-poster bed with the original burgundy velvet curtains," Ayrium said with a gesture towards that stately piece of furniture. "Clean sheets ... clothes in the dresser." She moved around the room, demonstrating as she talked. "The bathroom articulates with Mom's room, in case you need anything. Dad will be sleeping on the other side while he's here." She smiled. "I'll leave you now, to settle."

She gave him a hug and was gone.

For a moment, Amel felt terribly alone. Then he started to explore his new environment, finding it reassuringly familiar after his first exposure to the great outdoors.

His room's ornate wooden dresser would have been a treasure back home on subterranean Gelion, where all green-world products were imports. He found a pair of stretch pants ideal for exercise and put them on. He also selected a dressing gown and slippers for later, and left them on his bed. Then he closed the drawers and cabinets of the dresser again, one by one, leaving their contents messier than he had found them.

Amel had to move only a few things in the bedroom to clear enough space for a workout. When satisfied, he stood at the center of the room, struck a starting pose, and summoned up a routine suitable for the space available. Then he let all his tensions unfold in his chosen art.

He danced.

The door cracked open a slit, and Von caught a glimpse of the woman Ayrium had called Maverick watching him, but he didn't mind. Other people gathered in the doorway as the minutes ticked by. He accepted them as an audience,

unconcerned so long as the logic of his movements kept him occupied.

When D'Ander shouldered past the spectators, Amel was too busy pouring himself backwards onto his hands to notice.

"Immortality?" D'Ander tried politely. But Amel only righted himself and let his body flow into the next move, snapping out an arm and then spinning his body to join it while keeping the arm still until it was time to switch, suddenly, into another pose.

"Dear One!" D'Ander boomed.

The endearment, in a man's voice, jarred Amel out of blissful absorption in the dance. He came to a standing position and centered his body. His heart hammered. Sweat trickled down his sides. Reason caught up with the chill on his skin as he schooled himself to get past the knot in his guts.

"That's an *Okal Lumens* thing, right?" Amel asked, in an edgy manner. "Calling me 'Dear One'?"

"Of course!" D'Ander folded his powerful arms across his chest. "Dear One, Divine Goodness, Sweet Soul. You dance beautifully," he added, using an elevated pronoun for 'he' with religious significance among Luminaries.

Amel swiped at his feathery black hair with splayed fingers, embarrassed by his adverse reaction.

"Thanks," he said, "but, really, I am so out of shape! All that flying and—"

D'Ander's look of pained sympathy shattered Amel's fantasy that his dancing skills still mattered. "Never mind," he muttered, feeling wrong-footed and bereft. It had only just occurred to him that being Amel meant he probably shouldn't practice courtesan arts.

"Show's over! Let's go!" Maverick interjected loudly as she came to life and began to herd the rest of the audience out.

Amel picked up a towel to dab at his face before draping it around his neck the way he might have after a workout back at Den Eva's, the establishment where he had worked on Gelion. The exercise left him with a warm, capable feeling of competence. Even his sometimes annoy-

ing vanilla scent—which he had learned was a symptom of being a descendant of the Golden Emperor—was light, not sweet and cloying the way it could be when he was stressed. But D’Ander still made him feel small and inadequate.

“You ought to get some rest,” D’Ander told him reasonably.

Amel knew that, but he hadn’t slept well since his run in with the Reetions and their visitor probe. When he slept, the clear dreams took control.

Ayrium stuck her head in the door. “Any luck putting our teenage miracle to bed, Dad?” she asked.

“Amel is a Soul of Light,” D’Ander told his daughter with strained patience. “Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Sorry,” said Ayrium. “Figured you were treating him with enough respect for both of us.”

“Do I *have* to be a Soul of Light?” Amel asked in a small voice.

The thunderous look D’Ander cast at him made him babble. “I mean,” he said, “I’m only thirty-four percent Golden Demish, which is just one percent more Golden Demish than you are, Your Highness. So why am I a Soul of Light if you’re not?”

D’Ander’s impatience evaporated in a smile. “Of course,” he said, indulgently. “You have a sweet nature and a modest one. Any true Soul of Light would be reluctant to acknowledge himself one! But believe it, Amel! For I have no doubts.”

Amel looked at Ayrium. “Ayrium is Golden, too, through you. If anyone I know is a Soul of Light, Your Highness,” he insisted, in dead earnest, “it’s Ayrium.”

Ayrium gave an astonished laugh. “Please! Don’t get Dad started on all the things I’m not!” She smiled to show it didn’t matter. But Von saw through her in a flash of insight so clear that he lost track of his argument. He had always been aware he had a gift — or curse — of intuition about people, although there was nothing metaphysical about it as far as he was concerned. He was simply alive to the subtleties of the emotions between father and daughter.

ter. D'Ander was uncomfortable with Ayrium because she excelled at those things a Demish father wanted in a son, and his bastard daughter's mere existence mocked him somehow. It was equally clear that Ayrium knew.

"What is it?" D'Ander asked excitedly.

Amel gave a start. "What?"

"Just now," said D'Ander. "You saw beyond our words. You felt something. I have seen that look in Fahild, the Golden Emperor. Something changes, and it is as if he sees your naked soul. Fahild I cannot press to explain himself. He's too fragile. But you —" D'Ander gripped Amel's shoulders in his big hands. "Tell me, Amel, what were you thinking just now?"

Amel stared back at the larger man, wide-eyed, his mouth too dry to answer even if he'd wanted to.

Ayrium came to his rescue. "Dad," she said, and tugged gently on D'Ander from behind, "give the kid a break and back off."

"Can't you see how important this is?" D'Ander flared at her. "It proves his heart! Ava Delm never glimpsed souls!"

"Maybe he did," Amel said as the idea occurred to him, "and used his insights to control his courtiers."

D'Ander blinked, his face blank with shock. "That would be evil!" He paused to swallow. "The foul corruption of a gentle gift."

"I ... I'm sorry," Amel stammered, wishing he had kept the idea to himself. "I'm sure I must be wrong."

The chill left D'Ander's features in a hot gush. He seized Amel and crushed him in a hug. To Amel's surprise, it didn't feel the least threatening or sexual. In fact, it made D'Ander seem less fearsome. He hugged the Golden prince back willingly enough, returning strength for strength to prove he wasn't as fragile as D'Ander said his great grandfather Fahild was.

D'Ander released him with tears standing in his eyes, which captured Amel's attention. He had always felt foolish about how easily he cried, but if D'Ander did it maybe it was just a trait of Golden Demish men, the same way being unable to cry was typical of very Vrellish people. No one

could accuse a great sword champion like D'Ander of being anything less than a manly Demish man, whether he cried or not.

"Forgive me," D'Ander said, with anguish in his tone. "There are moments when I cannot bear to know what you have suffered without having a throat to slit for it or a face to smash."

Amel blinked. "Oh," he said, a bit stunned. He had not been thinking along those lines at all.

D'Ander touched him again lightly, with reverence, and hurried out of the room.

"I've never believed in the Soul of Light thing the way Dad does," said Ayrium, "but since I've met you, I am put out for the first time about his never letting me meet Fahild for fear I'd make him faint on sight or something."

Amel was sure she meant it. But the next minute Ayrium denied any disappointment with a laugh. "Oh, stop emoting in all directions!" she ordered, and gave him a playful shove.

"Time to sleep," she followed up, pointing at the bed like a stern matron of novices at Den Eva's.

Amel swallowed. "I'm afraid to try. Ayrium, you know how the Reetions tried to fix two memories of things I'd done wrong in the past, to make me braver? Well, ever since, whenever I go to sleep, it is as if the truth of what I really did is trying to reassert itself, to put things back the way they really were. I have to relive those mistakes over and over, as vividly as if I were really there. I can't do it, Ayrium!" He warmed to his confession. "I'm afraid!"

She took him briefly in her arms. Then she held him away from her to fix him with a serious stare. "It's your Demish memory correcting itself," she said, "just as if you'd taken damage *rel*-skimming. But it can't last forever and you have to sleep." She winked to reassure him. "We'll be close by." She squeezed his hand, once, and left.

Amel remained standing where she'd left him, staring at the bed. At last he shed his clothes and got in. He liked to sleep naked because bedclothes made him feel encumbered, but no sooner had he closed his eyes than he worried

about what would happen if he woke up in the grip of a clear dream. He got up, took a bath, put on pajama bottoms, got back into bed, and thrashed around, getting comfortable, for what seemed like a very long time before he fell asleep.

The first thing he dreamed about was pleasant. He was in bed with Ann, the brown-skinned Reetion woman, trying to get her to explain to him what she meant by declaring a relationship with him. He never could figure it out because she kept distracting him with sexual invitations he found impossible to turn down.

Things went wrong suddenly. One moment he was with Ann and the next he was sealed in the visitor probe with a Reetion medic flipping through his memories like a stack of cards.

"What should you have done?" the medic asked as she selected one.

"No!" he protested. "I don't want to remember!"

But it was too late. His sister was there before him, once again, telling Princess H'Us of Silver Hearth how H'Reth was abusing him, putting her livelihood on the line for him, and he couldn't back her up. He couldn't look the princess in the eyes and say, "Yes, it is all true." He wanted to, but he was afraid to die. He couldn't form the words.

"Amel!" a man's voice penetrated the dream.

A man. Like H'Reth.

"No!" Amel cried. Lashing out in anguish, he groped to get back into the moment when his silence condemned his sister to an unknown fate.

Something went thump.

Amel hurled himself into the drapes around his bed, trying to run after his sister as she was led away. He expected no physical obstruction. Reality contradicted him in the form of velvet drapes. He blundered through those, his actions incompatible with his surroundings, and struck his face hard on the floor.

Stunned, Amel lay where he'd fallen, not trusting his senses. Pain radiated from his nose, followed by a hot gush of blood.

There were other people in the room. Ayrium knelt to help him. On the far side of the bed, Perry was helping D'Ander up.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Amel choked out, not sure if he was thirteen or sixteen, commoner or Pureblood.

Ayrium pulled over a heavy wooden chair upholstered in embroidered flowers. "Your nose is bleeding," she said as she made him sit down.

"I'm all right," D'Ander was saying in a rough voice to Perry D'Aur. "It's my fault. I should —" His words were cut off by a rasping cough.

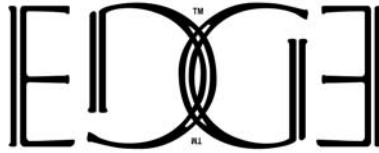
"D'Ander, don't be stupid," Perry said with force. "He almost crushed your windpipe with that blow! You are coming with me to get it looked at, and tomorrow night, if necessary, we strap Amel down!"

"You can't —" D'Ander started and broke off in a spasm of coughs. "He's a Soul of —" D'Ander croaked, and was forced to stop.

"He —" Perry said with a special emphasis echoing D'Ander's choice of pronoun, "is a one hundred percent Sevolite highborn, and obviously stronger than he looks! Now you're coming to sick bay — Your Highness," she added as an afterthought, as if to mitigate her disrespectful manner.

Amel could not hang onto all the details. Perry meant to strap him down. In the wake of this idea, terror bloomed. He burst into tears, his face throbbing, and clung to Ayrium, staining her loose pajamas with blood from his bleeding nose.

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Lynda Williams

Lynda Williams is the author of the Okal Rel saga (<http://www.okalrel.org>), published by Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing. She always knew she wanted to write but postponed the inevitable with a series of careers in crisis intervention, journalism, software development and support, teaching applied computing at the post-secondary level, managing a web development lab for distance education and stints as a librarian in both public and academic settings.

The Okal Rel saga evolved with her, collecting wisdom and ideas from her studies and experiences. She is particularly grateful for the encouragement and intermittent participation of a few special friends. Lynda's preoccupation in her writing is with characters and how they negotiate relationships and moral dilemmas created by serious cultural differences and technology representing our best hopes and worst fears.

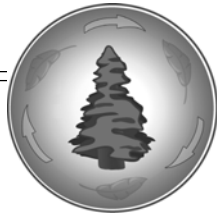
The Okal Rel universe was designed to model social problems caused by mankind's great potential for doing harm through the blind pursuit of personal goals. Heroes

stride the stage with charismatic power, but no leader can shun or exterminate an enemy without suffering serious consequences. Life-supporting habitat is rare, and each culture must struggle to control its empowered members enough to protect it for future generations. No characters are without flaws, and even the bad guys have a redeeming characteristic or two.

Although most of Lynda's characters are old friends she knows as well as her real family, they have evolved to answer important questions which preoccupy her. Questions such as: Can Amel afford to be kind or will it simply destroy him? and How can Horth balance ambition with integrity? Book #1 of the saga, *The Courtesan Prince*, was released in 2005, followed by Book #2 *Righteous Anger*, in 2007.

Lynda's short story "The Harpy" appeared in 2006 anthology *Mythspring*, edited by Julie E. Czerneda. She has also published non-fiction works in a variety of capacities and works with other writers to fill in the blanks across the wide scope of the setting she creates for her own work.

Born 1958 in Prince George, British Columbia, Lynda holds three post secondary degrees. Her last Masters was in computation from McMaster University in Hamilton. She works as Instructional Designer for the Rural Acute Care Nursing Certification program at the University of Northern B.C. Lynda is married to David Lott with daughters Jennifer, Angela and Tegan.



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Title: **Pretenders - Part three of the Okal Rel Saga**

Author: Lynda Williams

Imprint: EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing

Category: Science Fiction Novel

Release Date: September 15, 2008

Pages: 304

Format: 6" x 9" Trade Paperback

Price: \$20.95

ISBN-13: 978-1-894063-13-5

Distribution:Fitzhenry and Whiteside
1-800-387-9776, 1-800-260-9777 (fax), SAN# S1151444

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