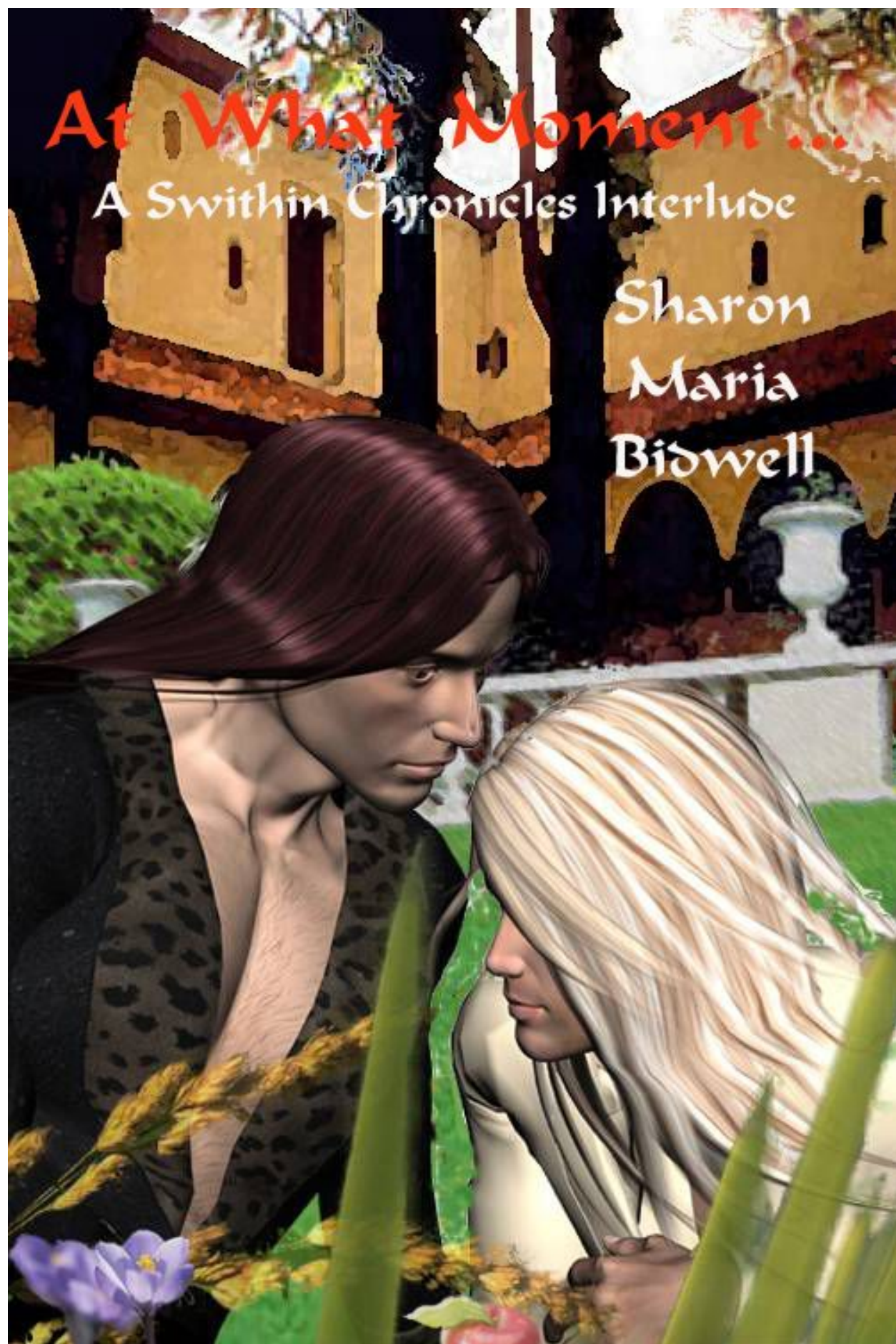


At What Moment ...

A Swithin Chronicles Interlude

Sharon
Maria
Bidwell



Praise for Uly's Comet

The relationship between Uly and Markis is a very complex one ... When Uly and Markis come together it is very loving, sweet and hot! Ms. Bidwell has created the perfect first story in this series, one filled with humor and epic scenes supported by a unique world for the reader to explore.

-- Fallen Angel Reviews

You will take an adventure where one powerful, but lonely, man learns how to not only control the comet, but also the feelings and emotions inside him. Exciting adventures and sensual love scenes are all entwined together to make for a very entertaining read.

-- Coffee Time Romance

The Swithin Chronicles 1: Uly's Comet was mysterious and gripping. Gloriously handsome and virile men were everywhere in this novel. I loved each one of them, especially Ryanac. I realize he was not the prince, but his sense of fun and duty won me over.

-- Just Erotic Romance Reviews

The fact that it was common and accepted for the Swithin to take lovers of both genders made for a very interesting read. This was the story of a very giving, understanding, but lost, leader who depends on his friends to ground him and keep him safe. I found it interesting, entertaining even though it was a little disconcerting. A good read that will have you thinking and make you want to call your best friends and thank them for all they do and who they are. I recommend this book to all that like to read about political intrigue, magical powers, and the more emotional aspects of relationships and how they form.

-- Two Lips Reviews

"This world exists... somehow, somewhere. It has to."

"A multi-layered world with equal depth of emotion."

"This unbelievable world is truly believable."

"I love Ryanac. Even though he isn't the main character, he fulfils his role perfectly. The story wouldn't be the same without him. The other characters wouldn't be the same without his influence."

"Markis made this book for me. Uly is sweet and Markis needs him to be that way, but it was the prince that made this book for me. The internal battle he wages yet overcomes first at Ryanac's guidance, and then later, with his growing willpower, sold me on this one. His quiet, understated strength made me love him. I couldn't wait for him to give in to his feelings."

-- Reader comments

**A SWITHIN
CHRONICLES INTERLUDE:
AT WHAT MOMENT...**

Sharon Maria Bidwell

Warning

This story, the excerpts, and the books it relates to are intended for adults ONLY. Although the story contained herein is mild in content, The Swithin Chronicles contains explicit material that some readers may find offensive. The Swithin are a race that freely take lovers of either sex but the chronicles are largely a m/m romance. If you find homoerotic, ménage and open relationships offensive than this series is not for you.

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A Swithin Chronicles Interlude: At What Moment...

Sharon Maria Bidwell

This is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To my readers and those that keep me laughing when I'm feeling too tired to write.

At What Moment...

“It is challenging to distinguish at what moment love comes into bloom; it is less of a problem to recognise when it begins to bud at all.”

-- Swithin wisdom

(Please note: the events in this story happen between Chapter 11 and Chapter 12 of the novel, The Swithin Chronicles 1: Uly's Comet).

Markis walked along the corridor minus his shadow. Not the shadow of his being as dictated by the shifting shafts of sunlight, but the living shadow that stood as tall as he and broader still. His personal guard and best friend, Ryanac, would usually have argued when Markis requested that he left him alone, but the man understood what he was on his way to do. He was on his way to a lesson. Markis needed the solitude the short journey would provide to settle his nerves and mind.

Besides, the passage was within the confines of the palace walls. The corridor would lead him to the lower reaches where the lessons took place. Somehow, that seemed only fitting. Dark, nefarious purposes should happen in lower rooms and deep basements, set aside from public view. That was not the only reason Markis felt grateful that the chosen space was in such a place. The separation provided a barrier, an area he could set aside in his mind as detested, where he suffered pain both physically and emotionally while he tried to control the power of the comet. That allowed him to seek some semblance of peace elsewhere in the palace, to lead a relatively normal life and put his lessons from his mind at least some of the time. However, neither did he wish anyone to see him while a lesson took place, down on his knees, subjugated by the power and the wishes of his advisors and teachers.

He'd once undertaken these lessons naked because accidents did occur, as history illustrated. The power of his lineage that made him Lord prince regent of the Imperial Army, second only to the Swithin king, had caused physical damage to body and mind. The power had set clothes alight on occasion, not to mention what it had done to a man's body in other ways. Thankfully, the power

had seldom caused more than Markis's bladder to let go, but on occasion, he'd ejaculated in front of an audience, facts that if he'd not been Swithin would have made him hang his head in shame. Mercifully, his race viewed such happenstances as normal bodily functions. The power had also caused his skin to bleed, even to split, and his body to pour sweat, so perhaps there was sound reasoning behind their initial resolve. Still, Markis no longer cared. He went to these lessons clothed; if he soiled his garments, so be it.

He shook his head. These gloomy thoughts were not helping. His pace slowed. He tossed the apple he carried into the air and caught it again with one hand. He had picked the apple up earlier, fully intending to eat it, but he'd been waylaid and he'd been carrying it around for an hour. Now, the lesson approached and the moment was too close to the time to eat now. The fruit would sour in his stomach and he would likely vomit. He would be in no state to eat it afterwards.

Markis stopped, staring at the fruit, stupefied. The item looked so peculiar in his hand, suddenly, so innocuous given what he had to look forward to in the next hour or so. The apple did do one thing though, and he discovered he was smiling as a certain image arose in his mind. *Uly*. The apple made him think of Uly and the stupid game he had played with the street thief when the young man first came to the palace.

Markis had given Uly a simple choice, to stay or go, but rather than say that outright in the beginning, he had tested him, put temptation in his path. Even when Uly had failed the test, it had been with good intentions and a good heart.

Markis glanced up, looking down the length of the corridor ahead. The afternoon daylight provided a diffuse light that belied the pain awaiting him.

Turning his head, Markis looked back over his shoulder. He was alone. He looked back the way he'd been heading. Stairs at the end would take him down to what he often silently referred to as the punishment room. He could already feel the comet gathering, ice collecting, rolling together, and trapping dirt and other deciduous things within the power as it rolled. He could taste the peculiar taste of ice on his tongue and feel the sharp pain of it biting through. He'd been late to a lesson before but never too late.

Markis turned on his heel and hurried back the way he had come at something only just short of a run. Uly would be in one of the courtyard gardens. He only knew this because of something Ryanac had said. Uly's lessons were not as harsh as those Markis dealt with. The young man learned etiquette, reading, writing, science and many other intelligences and skills. Today the young man had a couple of hours free and as the weather took a strangely clement turn, he had decided to read in one of the gardens. Uly had no doubt answered in reply to a question or mentioned it to Ryanac in all innocence, but as for Ryanac letting Markis know... Had his guard let it slip on purpose? Markis wouldn't put it past the man but he didn't mind this time. Grinning, he hurried out of the corridor and took the turning to the right. He hardly ever minded Ryanac's interference. He trusted his friend's interference more than most people's impartiality. He'd never let anyone else behave like that, of course.

Markis ignored the few surprised glances his appearance brought forth. He often took a turn in one of the gardens, just not this time of day. Most possessed no knowledge of his schedule and they wouldn't know he'd been on his way to a lesson, but still, he would not usually be going into a garden right now, and that was the only direction the path he followed led.

He paused at the door leading out. He'd pushed it open without hesitation, but the cool breeze that wafted over his face made him pause. He closed his eyes for a moment, and breathed in. The air smelt so clear, so clean, so... uncontaminated that it was difficult to believe this was not one of the gardens of his homeland.

The Swithin were conquerors -- something Markis waged war with his feelings over, but he was not yet king and he had little influence on such things just now -- and Uly's race were one of those they had 'liberated' some years ago. It did little to sooth his nerves to consider that this was a land and a people who would have succumbed to abject poverty in a few years, likely wiped out by disease and in-fighting. The stink of the city was nothing as it had once been but still, the plants in the garden cleaned the air. That was why they had created the open parkland and imported many such floras. Simply, they needed to breathe and breathe well. So, Markis took the time to savour the air.

His position here not only tested his skill at ruling, but it set him apart from distractions while he learned control. Duty was *all* here, should dictate his entire existence, or that was the idea. The council hadn't counted on such a delectable distraction as Uly.

He spotted the young man easily, lying on his front under a magnoli tree, much like the one Markis had sat beneath on the night the thief tried to steal his purse. Ryanac understandably pitched a fit when Markis scarpered from the palace to seek solitude but if he hadn't done so that fateful night, he would never have encountered his little thief. It occurred to him now that he'd not left the palace walls, not slipped out into the city unaccompanied for some time. In truth, he no longer felt the need to. He had all he needed right here.

The young man didn't even look up as he approached. The brow furrowed slightly in concentration, occasionally the lips moved, no doubt sounding out a more difficult word in the book he read. Only when Markis's shadow fell across him did Uly give a start and look up. Even then, he blinked, his gaze searching. Tendrils of his hair fell across his face, blew over his eyes, cheeks and lips as the breeze stirred it. That hair was no longer the dirty colour it had once been when Uly first came here. Depending how the light caught it, his hair sometimes looked white, sometimes like pale, spun gold. The garden was not one of the largest but a little wind managed to snake its way into the rectangle. The way the light fell, Markis couldn't be more than a dark shape in the other man's view.

Going to his knees and then to one hip, Markis joined Uly on the grass. The ground covering wasn't grass, not in the way the locals knew it, anyway, but rather a low-lying plant. As he shifted, this plant gave off a dry, musky scent that reminded Markis of hay in a barn. Aroma was often another thing that reminded him of home.

"What are you reading?" The last time Markis asked that question, Uly had been reading a boring book on Swithin society. While that was good, Markis had told him to try to read for fun at least some of the time. At a glance, Markis could see the volume was slimmer and lighter than the intellectual books. Not that some of their novels weren't intellectual or thick and heavy in substance too, but no way was the book Uly held a study book. Of course, that other time, the evening turned sour than had grown strangely sweet in what took place between them. That night ended with Markis giving Uly the first kiss the younger man had ever received, but the memory also left a bitter aftertaste considering that the comet had almost got the better of him.

Never again, Markis vowed, would he hurt Uly like that even if it meant the comet consumed him. He feared to make the vow and yet was surprised when he felt an almost physical sensation of something shifting within him at the thought, almost as if something else made the decision on his behalf. Maybe the comet agreed and it would certainly be nice to think so. Markis preferred caution in all things where Uly was concerned.

Uly's frown grew sterner. "It's a story, called The Tower, but I..." Uly hesitated, his gaze flicking to Markis's face and then back to the book. "I don't understand it," he continued, sounding embarrassed by the confession.

"I know the story well. What don't you understand?" Markis waited, patiently, propped up on one hand, sitting on his left hip, the apple held firmly in his right. He could prompt Uly, but he didn't want to do that. He had asked the question and Uly would answer given a few moments to gather his courage.

Markis watched Uly's face as the younger man figured this all out for himself, and then began to talk.

"There are a couple of things. The tower... The girl's mother takes her there to keep her away from men, from su... suitors." Uly said the word, not as though he found it difficult, but as though the meaning was a new concept to him, which it probably was. "Why would she do that?"

"To protect her."

"Protect her from what?"

"From unsuitable admirers." Markis couldn't help smiling. To his delight, Uly flushed and looked down.

"I can understand her mother wanting to protect her but why not just advise her and watch over her?"

"Ahh..." Markis reached for the book. Uly was two pages from the end. "Finish it. I will wait." He sat there looking around at nothing in particular so as not to make Uly feel awkward while he read. The amount of times Markis's gaze longed to wander back to those grey eyes both disturbed and delighted him. He stared up at the sky, and suddenly thought of the time. He chased the small pang away. His teachers and advisors could wait.

"She's selfish."

Uly's comment made Markis turn his head in his companion's direction.

"The mother. She wanted to have fun. She thought she could lock her daughter up and not have to trouble herself by doing any of the work that a mother should."

"Yes, but do you realise that a few weeks ago you wouldn't have thought that way?"

Uly's colour deepened. He squirmed a little. That part of the story was so clearly a reflection on Uly's race that Markis understood how uncomfortable it must feel to face such a thing.

Markis slipped down to the ground, resting his weight on the back of his arm and his head on his hand. Uly lay on his front, knees bent, legs crossed at the ankles, heels moving slowing back and forth in the air, the movement seemingly unconscious on the young thief's part. The area they shared now felt small and private. Indeed, where they sat it was unlikely anyone could look down on them. Markis couldn't help wondering if Uly had chosen the spot on purpose. Perhaps a troubled prince wasn't the only one to seek solitude. He sought a way to explain the contents of the book.

"The woman thought she could lock her daughter up and be a mother that way, but that so doing it would allow her to have fun, ease the burden on her. What she doesn't realise until the end of the book is that having a daughter wasn't a burden at all. Only when she loses what she had does she realise that."

Uly was nodding. "I get that now."

"What else don't you understand?"

"That when a suitor finally fights his way to her, the woman doesn't want to leave the tower. He takes ages and has to resort to all manner of tricks to persuade her." Uly looked up into Markis's eyes. "Why wouldn't she want to leave? Why would anyone want to be trapped like that?"

Now, it became Markis's turn to feel uneasy. He sought for the best way to answer that, without dithering over his response for too long. If he kept Uly waiting for a reply, Uly might doubt

his word. The trouble was, the only way for him to answer honestly meant facing a few unsavoury and very personal truths.

“There are many ways we can become trapped or even trap ourselves in life. The tower isn’t a real building. I mean, it is, for the purpose of the story, but it is also something else. It’s a metaphor.” When Uly’s gaze narrowed, Markis explained. “A metaphor is way to describe something by using some other descriptive word or phrase. It represents something, usually something abstract, theoretical, intangible.”

Markis sighed. He didn’t know if he was trying too hard or the words were too big for Uly to understand. This time when Uly flushed, Markis found no delight in it, just the opposite. A moment later pride won out.

“You mean it’s symbolic of something else.”

“Yes.” He almost said ‘good’, but Uly didn’t need that kind of patronising praise. “In this case, it is the woman’s state of mind. Her mother created the prison and it’s the only world she’s ever known. The idea of leaving frightens her. Yet she wants to leave. Some part of her knows there’s more out there in the world, and she longs to experience it, but she’s afraid. It takes time, but her would-be lover persists and, slowly, she relents. She rides away and her mother is left with nothing but memories.”

“It’s a lesson,” Uly said, quietly.

“Yes, but it teaches more than one thing. It’s about responsibility. It’s about love. It’s about risk, among other things.”

“Facing your fears,” Uly murmured. Markis wanted to ask him to explain the comment, but he did no such thing. He watched Uly’s face while the younger man’s thoughts played out. Slowly, a soft glow diffused Uly’s face. Was it possible that Uly realised the story could refer to his situation or even that of a certain Swithin prince equally? As much as Markis wanted to know, he couldn’t bring himself to ask.

“Bite?” Markis asked, instead. Uly eyes widened and he suddenly looked startled. Markis waved the apple under his nose. “I know you like them. I know you feed them to the horses regularly.”

“Shouldn’t I?” Uly sounded worried.

“No, it’s fine. Though, not too many.”

“I know how many they should have,” Uly said, his voice taking on a defensive tone. Markis blinked in surprise. Uly, perhaps realising he had answered back, glanced away. When he looked back, Markis made certain all Uly would see was him smiling. Setting aside his reservation on the subject of eating prior to a lesson, he bit into the apple and munched, letting the slightly sweet and yet sour taste linger on his tongue before swallowing. This variety of apple was nothing but contrasts. The distinct flavours grew even more pronounced when cooked.

“Do you remember when I last gave you an apple?”

Uly’s gaze didn’t seem to know where to linger. Finally, his gaze settled on the apple in Markis’s clasp. He nodded.

Although the memory brought to mind certain unpleasant things about that time, it also conjured up the strange intimacy that had existed between them during those moments. Markis had set Uly a challenge to make the decision to stay or go. He wanted Uly to remember that he had chosen to stay, and the apple was linked to that. As he saw Uly swallow, he could only imagine the other man's thoughts, but Markis was certain Uly remembered and felt things similar to what the prince experienced right now.

"Do you know many cultures consider the apple a symbol of temptation?" He waited until Uly's gaze moved to meet his, then shifted closer. Only a few inches separated them, now. He waved the apple under Uly's nose once again. "Bite?" he asked, putting a touch of dare into his voice.

His gaze not wandering at all, Uly leaned in, his mouth and lips coming closer to the apple. Markis struggled to hold the younger man's gaze, knowing this moment was important. He longed to glance down to Uly's open mouth, but he fought not to do so. He felt the pressure of Uly's teeth biting into the fruit, rather than saw it happen. Then Uly pulled back, and Markis did flick his gaze down, just for a second. A small, pale chunk of fruit disappeared into Uly's mouth as his tongue flicked out to claim it. Uly chewed, still staring at him. Markis held his gaze and took a bite of the apple, too.

Offering the fruit while he chewed, this time Markis waited until Uly's lips touched the apple before he pulled it back. Uly's head jerked; his gaze narrowed. Markis let his mouth curve into a small, knowing smile. Uly's gaze flicked down to his mouth and then up. Markis wiggled the apple. Uly moved in and when Markis took the fruit out of his reach, the young man followed. Uly stole another bite but when he pulled back, their bodies lay closer. Again, Markis bit the apple.

They shared the fruit, Markis teasing Uly with each second bite, making the young man move nearer. He could see the knowledge of what he was doing in the thief's eyes, and yet Uly went where he led. When juice ran over his fingers, Uly gazed up at him with an almost too knowledgeable expression, before he leaned forward and lapped the free-flowing liquid up with his tongue. Markis's heart skipped. When the heat of Uly's tongue seeped into his fingers, his cock throbbed. He became aware of how close Uly was, and how their breathing had changed by the rise and fall of their chests. Taking the last bite of the apple, Markis pitched the core away. Then he took hold of the piece of fruit from between his lips and held the morsel, licking the juice from his lips. The fact that Uly watched his tongue flick out to lick, made Markis draw in an even deeper breath.

The wind kicked up. The breeze contained a chill that should have sent them scurrying inside. The shadows lengthened. A few drops of rain fell in prelude to something heavier, but Markis was only aware of this peripherally. Nothing was as important as this quiet moment.

"Last piece," Markis whispered. "Share?" Uly moved in as though to take a bite of the piece between his fingers but, at the last moment, Markis slipped the chunk between his lips and offered it with his mouth. Uly hesitated and then continued. His face drew close as he tilted his head, opening his mouth in such a way that would allow him to bite the segment. Markis felt a slight scrape of teeth against his lip at the same instant that Uly pulled back and changed the angle, no doubt trying not to bite Markis by accident. Markis wasn't sure he cared if Uly bit him, but he couldn't tell Uly that, and, because of other things that had happened in their short history together, to refer to it might frighten the thief. Uly's teeth finally fastened on the morsel, but that meant their lips touched. Their eyes closed.

The sheer pleasure of the moment was as intoxicating as the wine they sometimes made from these apples. An abstract thought that Uly had not tasted that wine entered Markis's mind and then fled in the sensation of soft, warm, moist lips touching his. The pleasure did not surprise Markis, but

the soft sound Uly uttered did. Markis bit. The fruit broke. They chewed, lips still together.

Finally, they swallowed. The fruit was gone. There was no reason to linger.

Gently, delicately, Markis drew in Uly's lower lip between his. As he did so, he opened his eyes to a slit. Uly's eyes were still closed, but a slight frown tightened his brow. Markis let his eyes drift shut and kissed Uly's lip with his, making soft, subtle movements. Then gently, he drew back. Uly's eyes opened. The bright steely luminous gaze searched his in question. Markis smiled. When he moved back in, Uly remained, perched on his elbows, arms folded against the ground so that Markis encountered no obstruction. This time, Markis took Uly's upper lip into his mouth. He kissed it gently with his lips. When he pulled back, Uly stared at him in wonder.

"Again?" Markis barely let the question ease out as a sound. He expected Uly to flush with embarrassment but much to his surprise, his little thief nodded consent. Markis went to work on Uly's bottom lip again, only this time a little deeper. Although Uly had to be aware that the position placed Markis's upper lip in his mouth, the first time, Uly had kept his mouth open. This time, as Markis drew on his mouth a little deeper, Uly returned the gesture, taking Markis's top lip between his.

Markis lost track of everything. He had no idea of how long his mouth worked on Uly's lip but at some stage he also sucked and nibbled. Uly copied the movement and Markis moaned softly, much to his consternation. He pulled back, thinking he should stop this, but even as he did, his mind and body took over. He moved to work on Uly's top lip while Uly worked on his lower. The kiss took up a rhythmic movement, their mouths feasting on the other. The kiss was like feeding, though they swallowed no sustenance. Still, the uncanny certainty overcame Markis that he could no more survive without this than he could go without food or water. Markis wanted this moment to last forever and the way Uly returned every subtle alteration, suggested the other man felt the same way.

Their lips battled, waged a war no one could win. The prince spiralled, not quite out of control, yet free falling, but this was not the abyss -- the sometimes, cold, dark, empty place where the comet took him. This vortex sucked him down, then threw him out, sent him rocketing into the universe. Coherent thought ceased.

Markis grew hard but even that was vague in his consciousness. He knew only the soft, tugging sensation on his mouth. Their lips changed again, reversing position, and Markis had no idea who instigated the change. He was no longer Markis, the Swithin prince. In that moment, he only knew himself as a man. His heartbeat floundered. A gentle stinging burned his lips and they throbbed, but it could be Uly's pulse that thudded in his mouth. His mouth filled with heat but Markis could no longer tell if the feeling was caused by the heat of his lips, or the warmth of Uly's breath. He breathed in and he could smell apples. He could also smell the heady scent that was all Uly, all want, need and desire, combined in that one sensation, so intense, yet so delicate, that he wanted his lips to bleed. He wanted to pour down into Uly's mouth like wine.

Fingers crawled into his hair, over his scalp, but it wasn't Uly's touch, and the feeling came from no one human. The feeling was just another sensation, almost as though someone watched them, but it wasn't that either. Markis's skin just crawled with awareness, of knowing he could lose control if he let go, not of the comet but all his pent-up frustration. He could lose himself in Uly, roll him over, strip him right there in the open, and something told Markis that Uly would let him.

He couldn't do that. He *wouldn't* do that. If he ever took Uly, it would be a more controlled environment. Passion was fine but Uly was inexperienced, or his experience was such that Markis wanted to wipe it from Uly's memory in that first moment when a caring lover penetrated him. Besides, that wasn't what he wanted. He wanted this -- this single moment where nothing mattered,

not their past, not their future.

Time stretched. Markis forgot the garden. Rain pattered, but the clouds withheld the deluge. The change in the weather didn't matter. Nothing mattered. He forgot time existed. He forgot pain he'd endured, people awaiting his arrival. He forgot that Ryanac would panic and possibly skin him, prince or otherwise, if they declared him missing. He forgot his silent promise to keep his and Uly's bodies apart as they rolled together. He had no idea who moved first so that Uly was suddenly under him, his hands grasping, curling into Markis's clothes.

They weren't kissing with tongues, and yet this odd tasting of lips was doing things to him he hadn't thought possible. He had experienced the delight of this kiss before, which was why he tried this variation on Uly, but he didn't remember this type of kiss as a gentle thing. He'd been younger then, and he'd wanted to quench a more urgent, ardent desire. Uly was older than Markis had been at the time, but the young man was unloved enough that Markis expected Uly to want so much more than this touching and exploration of lips. Yet the way Uly moved under him, the fierce grip of his fingers, the soft moans he uttered, said that Uly wanted this to continue. Markis wanted to oblige. He was weightless, lighter than air, floating and fluttering, unable to settle.

Markis flinched, breaking the kiss by accident. Small, cold drops against his cheek told him the rain finally started to fall more urgently.

Staring down into Uly's eyes, Markis watched as they slowly cleared and focused. He probably carried the same dazed expression. Heavy, icy drops of water hitting the back of his head and slipping down to his neck helped clear his mind. How long had they been out here? He moved his head enough to glance around. No one watched them that he could see. The sky looked dirty-white in colour, not quite grey, but pale and heavy with rain.

The word 'enchanted' came to mind. He'd been rapt, enthralled, lost to the world for several moments and in that time...

Markis stared down into Uly's eyes. Uly flinched as a few drops of rain struck his forehead but he didn't move. He let the rain slide from his skin to disappear into his hairline, and he didn't let go of Markis's tunic. His grip held the prince just a short distance from him. They stared at each other.

Tell him how you feel.

Markis wanted to. Now was not the moment, yet the time was in some ways the perfect moment. When the prince moved to pull back, Uly's grip tightened. Markis let the younger man hold him there for another instant, and then pulled away. Clearly reluctant, Uly let him go. As Markis stood up, the rain began to fall upon Uly's face but all Uly did was lie there, close his eyes, and let it happen. His tongue flicked out to swipe over his lips, licking up the precipitation. Those lips held a soft, bruised appearance.

Desire as he'd never known it swept through the prince, and Markis almost staggered. He fought not to fall over Uly and take him there and then. His heart stammered in his chest. He couldn't breathe. When he told Uly to get up and to get out of the rain, it didn't sound like his voice at all. He couldn't be sure he had said anything but he must have for Uly moved to his feet, gathered up the now soggy book, and stood. His movements looked as unsteady as Markis felt.

Inside the palace once more, Markis swept his gaze back and forth along the corridor. They were alone but sound from one end indicated the presence of people. Markis took Uly's arm and guided him in the other direction. He stopped at a bisecting section. The stairs would take Uly up into the castle and from there the other man could make his way back to his room. Markis faced another destination. He had no idea what the seers would think of him turning up so terribly late to his lesson and wet at that, and he didn't care. He placed a kiss on Uly's forehead intended to have

the young man on his way but Uly clasped at him, tilting his head back, presenting his lips in invitation.

He couldn't. He dared't. He was late and he hadn't decided what to do about Uly yet. There could be no more kisses until he made that decision, but Markis kissed him anyway. Their lips pressed, just hard, firm pressure, but Markis was aware of something behind the kiss. Of pent-up frustration, fierce desperation and something he didn't want to put a name to, though it floated around in his mind with a snapping quality almost like vengeance. *Love*.

He couldn't afford to love Uly. It was too cruel if he let the other man love him in return, but still their lips pressed and neither of them seemed inclined to pull back.

Markis forced himself to stir, yet his hand moved even as he did. His thumb swept Uly's lips and, yes, they were swollen, puffy and pink, hotter than the surrounding skin, wet, moist, inviting, open, the white gleam of Uly's teeth drawing the eye to the soft, delicate flesh within. Markis wanted his tongue. He wanted to lick, to suck, sweep his tongue along that other length and feel it dance. He wanted to take Uly's breath into his lungs and suffocate if it meant he ever had to break the kiss again. He resisted as much as he could, taking his tongue to Uly's ear, biting and licking, travelling, trailing soft licks and kisses down to Uly's jaw and then across his face, planting feather-light kisses over his cheeks, on each eye, and then back to his lips.

A crazy vision of them, unable to break apart, never drinking and never eating, dying in some eternal embrace made him almost cry out. Madness threatened and the pain washed in. He couldn't have Uly. Everything everyone had ever taught him said so. He could not have a lover until he controlled the comet.

For the first time in his life, Markis truly hated it. That odd feeling of shifting happened again and Markis sent his thoughts to whatever place inside him the comet existed. He didn't know if that place was real, if the comet could even hear or understand him. He just let the power know how much he wanted this young man, how much he longed for him. He let himself feel all the pain -- not the physical pain like that experienced during a lesson, but all the pain he'd buried for so long -- and the emotion almost overwhelmed him. A small cry left his lips, but he pressed his mouth to Uly's in that moment. He let Uly swallow the sound down, and then turned on his heel sharply, marched away and left him.

Certain Uly would leave, Markis listened out for his footsteps. When he had heard none by the time he reached the far end of the corridor, he glanced back despite his better judgement. Uly stood where he had left him, watching. His stance seemed to say he wasn't going anywhere, but maybe that was just wishful thinking. Markis nodded in his direction -- again, against what his brain advised, but as his heart dictated. Then he pushed open the door and hurried through. Oddly, this time, he craved the pain of the lesson.

The End

Read on for previews and excerpts

Sharon Maria Bidwell

Sharon Maria Bidwell was born one New Year's Eve within the London area. Since having her first short story accepted and the editor announcing her as "a writer who is going places," her work -- poems, short stories and articles -- have appeared steadily in print and online publications. Previously, she kept the erotic side of her writing separate. The genre appealed though as it allows her the freedom to create something more expressive, less oppressive. She firmly believes that having a chance at such "free reign" reflects favourably in her work. It has always been a part of her personality in that she likes surprising and delighting people. She links her most favoured and often most successful work closely to fantasy, though her writing crosses genres.

She loves reading, the movies and going to the theatre and spending time with a few very special people. Her friends are waiting to discover something she isn't good at. She often thinks about moving but lives primarily in a world of her own. Visit this diverse writer's site at: <http://uk.geocities.com/theviewoveraonia>.

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Read on for an unedited preview of The Swithin Chronicles 2: The Comet's Tail

Resisting the sudden urge to step back, Markis stood his ground, a frown threatening. He didn't like the look he had seen in Ryanac's eyes just before the tent flap dropped and yet, at the same time, he did. He tried to swallow, aware his throat felt suddenly dry. A brief glance at the few items surrounding the pallet was enough to tell him that this was Ryanac's bed. Of course, the chances were he would have slept in Markis's tent or just outside it. He would be wherever Markis slept, and not just for personal reasons but for a sense of duty. He would not have left Tressa unattended, so he must have set a trustworthy guard over her even in the midst of a large camp containing their own men. The troop counted roughly a thousand men. They were safe enough, yet Markis never doubted Ryanac made certain he, Uly, and Tressa were always attended in some way. Whatever pretence Ryanac used to send Uly away tonight, he would have set a good man at his side. The act *was* for some pretence; Markis felt sure of that now. For some reason, Ryanac had sent Uly away from him for a short time. He should have been surprised but he wasn't. No more than it came as any surprise that Ryanac would have sought out a quiet place, even if he spent little time here.

They were as good as the same height. They stood with no more than half a dozen inches separating them. Markis swallowed and lifted his head. Though they could barely make out each other's features now that the flap had closed, he was Shavar and he would face the man before him even if he felt as uncertain as he had all those many years ago when they first made love. Ryanac had been his first male lover; Uly, his second. There were no others. He doubted there ever would be.

He opened his mouth to speak and Ryanac closed that small distance, filling the gap made by his parted lips with his. One hand snaked around the back of Markis's neck to grip the base of his skull, and, as he automatically closed his eyes, he became aware of the heat of that hand burning into his head and, ultimately, into his mind. The world drew down to the passion of Ryanac's deep invasion, the dry musk that was all Ryanac's smell and the closeness of the moment. When they finally broke apart, Markis blinked and opened his eyes to search his friend's face. "What brought that on?" he whispered.

He received no answer. His friend's dark eyes took him in, that quiet gaze all-consuming. "This is rather in the way, don't you think?"

It took Markis a moment to realise his friend referred to his clothing, and by then Ryanac's hands were moving deftly, separating hooks and unfastening buckles. He had gone out with only light armour today, believing to do otherwise would be an insult to the men surrounding him, protecting him, as well as stifling. Now he was in two minds as to whether the idea was a good one. The uniform was quite easy to remove but seeing the look in Ryanac's eye, he wasn't sure he wanted to be naked. He lifted a hand in a stalling gesture only to have it slapped away. Ryanac's hand gripped and wrapped his braid into a coil. He used the grip to jerk Markis slightly to one side and to press them together. Once more, the dim view of the tent was lost to his sight as Markis's eyes automatically closed for the kiss. His friend's free hand ran over his body through what remained of the outfit.

"Off," Ryanac grunted, and Markis only hesitated a moment. He felt strangely adrift, disconnected from what was happening. A strange atmosphere invaded the tent and he suspected that it largely came from Ryanac. Whatever goaded the man to these actions, whether it was love, lust, or both, he didn't feel as though Ryanac would accept a refusal. More than that, Markis didn't feel as though he had the right to refuse. That was crazy, of course. Sex was a thing only freely given, never taken. That was the Swithin way. On top of that, he was Shavar; he was a prince. Still, bare-chested now, it felt as though he had no say, no control. He opened his mouth, unsure what he intended to say, and what left his lips was a gasp. Ryanac jerked them together so that his naked, vulnerable flesh felt impaled by the harshness of buckles, belts and studs, and beneath all that, the hardness of Ryanac himself. As Ryanac used one hand to press them together and the other slipped lower to cup his backside, it left him with no doubt that his friend knew exactly how this felt and what it was doing to him. Both grips tightened and his body gave of its own volition. Hard, unforgiving adornments rubbed at sensitive areas, stroked his nipples to peaks. His back arched a little, forcing the heat of their groins together. Ryanac pulled back just enough so that the last of the light caught one of his eyes. The pupil glittered and then the man leaned in to whisper.

"I'm going to fuck you," Ryanac said softly, calmly, evenly. There was no question in that statement, no seeking permission. "I'm going to fuck you," Ryanac whispered, "and you are going to love it."

* * *

In Uly's Comet:

Unleash the Comet... Feel the power...

Markis Shaver, the Swithin Prince, controls the power of the Comet, which may be the only thing that will act as a deterrent in a war between two vast monarchies – a war that could devastate the natural world and must therefore be avoided at any cost, even if that means killing the many to save the few. As if things weren't bad enough, he may also have to rescue a princess and face a marriage of convenience and it doesn't help that Markis is still in training and struggles to control the power when he calls it forth. At times, he also struggles to control his temper, which is quick to react where his feelings are concerned. The lessons, alas, do not seem to be working and he is running out of time.

His personal guard and best friend, Ryanac, disagrees with the old teachings and has always insisted that Markis should embrace love, both emotionally and physically, to control the Comet ... but then again, he could be wrong.

When Markis leaves the palace one night to indulge in the luxury of a little solitude, he captures a young man and would-be thief. Out of boredom he decides to play a little game with the thief but little does he know that in time Uly will teach him a whole new lesson in desire ... and love. But if he gives into love physically before he has full control, what will it mean for the world?

If Uly, a street thief, can teach a prince to let go of control, maybe love really can conquer all. Markis is afraid of the ride but maybe he should just unleash the comet and feel the power...

-- The Swithin Chronicles 1: Uly's Comet available now Loose-Id.

<http://www.loose-id.net/searchresult.aspx?CategoryID=237>



In The Comet's Tail...:

Behind every great comet, there's a tale...

Markis Shaver, the Swithin Prince, has everything he ever thought he could want. He has Uly Samir -- his true love -- and he has found happiness again in the arms of Ryanac, his personal guard and best friend. He also has a woman any man would be proud to have as his wife to stand at his side as queen. They are on the way to the Swithin city, his homeland where he will rule as King. He's also beginning to control the comet. It no longer has its wicked way with him. He should be happy.

Uly has the love of a wonderful man. Markis loves him. He has much to look forward to and more than he ever dreamed of obtaining. He should be in high spirits.

Ryanac has manipulated Markis into embracing love and as he always believed, it has freed the man he loves from abject misery. It has also rekindled their relationship. He should be contented.

Tressa has a good man for a husband, three men to see to her highly sexed needs and she has escaped the backward views of her nation. She should be elated.

The four of them have a tedious two-week journey to undertake. What else should they fill these boring nights with but passion? They should be ecstatic ... if a little exhausted.

So, what is going wrong with their new intimate 'quartet'?

Markis has also stolen a book and he wants to try a little 'experiment' he has found in its pages. He needs Ryanac's help but it will let Markis deep into Ryanac's psyche and neither of them are sure this is a good thing. Even worse, Ryanac has always been the tail of the comet but he might not be the only one following.

Behind a great man, there is another, and another ... and a woman. Life should be great but even the best of relationships don't always run smoothly. Alas, personal struggles are not the only enemy...

-- The Swithin Chronicles 2: The Comet's Tail coming 2007 from Loose-Id.

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Read on for an excerpt from 'Space, Man'.

It took much pointing and hand gestures for Alex to receive a smile as his reward. It completely transformed the man's face, which had looked perpetually stern and perplexed up until this moment. Alex found he was smiling back, until his expression gave way to one of puzzlement. The young man reached out with his hand and let the spray from the shower run over his fingers. Surely, whatever country this guy came from, they used showers. Maybe he came from somewhere such as Norway or Finland. That would possibly explain the pale features, though the white hair was definitely unusual. Alex had thought it bleached, but now he was not so certain. It looked natural. Well, some people did go grey and even pure white, at quite a young age. Why wear those silly contacts, though?

As the stranger began to strip -- the suit came off easier than he expected -- heat rose to Alex's face. "I... Er..." He settled for turning his back, standing politely by, waiting for the garment, which he intended to put in the washing machine. Alex remained the good Samaritan, until only a brief glance had him turning his head, his gaze drawn inexplicably back to that tall, slender frame, each muscle bunching and twisting in statuesque perfection as it came into view.

Realising he gaped, Alex turned away, only to discover his throat felt unbelievably dry as he tried to swallow. Dear God, the man was beautiful! Firmly muscled, though incredibly, almost obscenely lean; everything looked so *tight*.

Moments later, he held a bundle of clothes in his hands and turned back to watch that sculptured Adonis step into the shower, despite knowing he shouldn't spy. A soft moan came from the man's lips as the water hit his skin. Alex's lips parted a little and then he had to snap his teeth together, hard, to keep from copying the sound. He'd explained the idea of shower gel and the stranger certainly seemed to have the hang of it, as having turned full circle to make sure he was wet all over, he now faced the wall, filled his hand with a generous dollop of the coloured gel from the can, and lathered it up in his hands. Alex's attempt to explain that it would expand into foam and that he need only use a little seemed redundant now; as he watched the thick, white cream spreading to cover every inch of that perfect skin, he couldn't help but feel somewhat glad of the man's extravagance.

His gaze followed those slender hands as they caressed every curve and slope, starting from the neck, moving down to the shoulders, and then to his sides. Muscles in his back rippled; the guy's backside jumped and jiggled. Water droplets ran in snaking trickles over his skin, joining to form heavier, fuller passages of thick, wet trails.

The pale man's hands moved lower, soaping up his thighs. He stood briefly, carefully, as he raised one leg so he could wash one smooth calve all the way down to his ankle. Then he repeated

the exercise to wash the other leg. Alex blinked, coming a little back to himself, and he might have left the room then, if the idea that the guy shaved his legs wasn't so overwhelming. No sooner did he decide this guy was peculiar, than he discovered things were just getting weirder. Those hands moved inwards now -- the stranger obviously paying attention to his groin. At least he would smell better, but the idea of him all squeaky-clean made Alex squeak in other ways.

As the stranger turned in the shower, Alex received another shock. The guy was completely hairless... everywhere, except for those tumbling white waves that sprouted from the top of his head. How had he failed to notice that? With nothing hidden, Alex received an eyeful.

Suddenly feeling uncomfortable, Alex looked up and met that glittering violet gaze. The lips curved upwards slightly, but the expression was more one of question than invitation.

Way to go. Caught staring, Alex fumbled for an excuse. "Don't forget to use the shampoo and wash your hair," he mumbled. He hurried out of the room, heart pounding. Alas, it wasn't the only thing throbbing with a wild, uncontrollable rhythm.

-- 'Space, Man' available now from Loose-Id.

<http://www.loose-id.net/searchresult.aspx?CategoryID=237>

* * *

Delightful! Simply delightful! This Fling is very well written, with a degree of character development that is suited to the length. ... Wonderfully described and fairly varied. Space, Man is an excellent, smooth flowing, out-of-the-ordinary quick read.

-- Just Erotic Romance Reviews

The situations that Mani got Alex in were both comical and intriguing. It was wonderful to watch the evolution of Alex and Mani's relationship and how they overcame their differences. Thanks goes to *Ms. Bidwell* for such a heartwarming story.

-- Fallen Angel Reviews

Sharon Maria Bidwell

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