

And it Please the Court

Isolde was pulled from dreams of her ex-lover by the sound of bells. The groom carried them slung over his shoulder as he entered the stable, and each pony held her breath in the hopes that she wouldn't be chosen for a pre-dawn run.

The first morning jobs were always the same sort of client: curfew-bound women needing a sealed hansom to take them to some early obligation or other. It was high-paying work, but so time consuming that the extra sleep was worth more to a pony than the fares.

Isolde heard the bolt on her stall slide back, and had to fight the urge to throw a tantrum right there. She craved sleep, but not for the rest it gave. She yearned to return to those dreams of the time when she was a truly free woman, living with one of the most powerful men in Mernica.

The groom smiled as he entered, and tossed the bundle of tack over the lower half of the door, bells jingling. The hard soles of his high boots echoed on the stone floor as he paced around Isolde, detaching the catheter and enema tubes from her sanitation sockets and inspecting her for injury. He squeezed a dollop of gel into one hand and began massaging it into Isolde's gloss-smooth rubber flesh.

She sighed into her bit, rolling it in her teeth as she worked her stiff jaw. The morning polish was the closest thing she got to a therapeutic massage. And as with most of the substances habitually put onto or inside her glistening body, the skingloss made her feel randier than she'd ever known in her old life.

Once she was oiled and polished, the groom fastened the harness around her. An imitation horsehair tail plugged into the enema socket, and the displays on her blinkers came to life. As the groom released Isolde's hand-hooves from the cuffs holding them high over her head, buckling them to either side of her gravity-defying breasts, she studied the job information being fed into her eyes.

The groom threaded a thin leather strap through Isolde's nipple rings and led her to a prepared hansom, hitching her to its front poles. While she tried to read up on her early fare, he reached between her legs and began to rub her modified clitoris in rough clockwise circles. Isolde clenched her teeth on the bit again as the stimulation triggered a modified reflex that caused her to prance in place, knees kicking high in the air as her thighs tried in vain to rub her to orgasm.

The groom pulled the strap from Isolde's piercings, patted the underside of her left breast, and switched on the hansom's whips. Twin lashes stung back and forth against Isolde's thighs, and her high-kicking immediately turned to a startled trot as she bolted for the collection point.

The streets of Alem Town were largely empty at this time of day, and Isolde almost ignored the congestion and route information coming from her blinkers. She bounded down deserted lanes, leg-hooves amplifying her stride. Somewhere inside them, Isolde was certain she could still feel her old human feet, crushed

cruelly into a permanent *en pointe* position. But these days she never noticed, largely due to the well-cushioned bounce-spring effect of the hooves on Alem's roads.

Isolde pranced in place in sexual frustration as she waited for her fares to step outside. She *had* to believe that her old limbs were still intact inside the pony-girl improvement suite. Her wrists, now bound to her shoulders by the cart harness, ended in smaller hooves that made fine manipulation of anything impossible. She dreamed of one day opening the fists that she was sure were bound inside, and playing the floodreed again.

Isolde's frustration mounted as she watched two women emerge from the building and make their way with excruciating slowness. Sophie's ankles swung forward and caught short with each step, fighting against the hobble skirt of her white laminate gown. Stella held her arm and shuffled beside her to keep pace, finding it easier to walk in the professional clothes she'd borrowed. Stella helped Sophie clamber up into the seat of the hansom and then climbed in beside her. They placed their ankles in the stocks by their feet and brought the doors down over their legs.

The moment the two women were locked in, the automated whips began again. Isolde raced down the path indicated by her blinders, hoping the two women would let slip some small piece of information about the world outside the stables. She focused her Improved hearing on the whispers in the cabriolet behind her, and had no trouble following the entire conversation.

"Listen," Stella sighed, as if admitting defeat against an ancient battle, "I just want to say. . . I'm sorry, and you were right all along."

Sophie looked suddenly perplexed, and brought her finger away from the ring that dangled from the front of her collar, "Whatever do you mean?"

Stella rolled her eyes, "Well, if you hadn't actually kept *actual clothes* around, I wouldn't have had anything suitable to wear to court today!"

"Oh, that!" Sophie laughed, "You know, that was originally not my decision. When I first came here, the rules for visiting diplomats forbade relying on local utilities. That's why that room looks like the inside of a caravan: they gave us all washers and fuel cells and enough fuel to keep us in lights and water for months. And then you hired that maid for me, and I guess I never had any reason to change any of it."

"Um, about that maid. . ." Stella bit the corner of her lip, "I didn't hire her, so much as, well. . . bought her."

"What?!" Sophie turned suddenly in horror, "But *why*? I mean, you always said—we always talked about. . ."

"I know! I know!" Stella held her head in her hands, "We had just broken up, and I had to do something drastic and spiteful. It was either that, or set the place on fire or. . . I dunno, sightseeing in Aekora or something! Anyway, she was

supposed to spy on you and confirm all my darkest suspicions, but of course they were all paranoid ex-wife nonsense. . . ”

Sophie just let Stella talk, her jaw hanging open. Stella finally bit her lip again and stopped digging herself in deeper. It was several seconds before Sophie spoke again.

“Just, to think. . . All this time, you were a slavemistress. . . ”

“Oh and I suppose you’ve abstained entirely from Torei’s misogynistic system of chattel slavery!” Stella spat, and her expression immediately curdled with regret at her outburst. Sophie’s finger had snapped right back to the ring on her collar, worrying it nervously once more.

“I’m. . . ” Sophie spoke softly, so that even the ponygirl had trouble listening in, “I’m an asset of a treaty corpus. The trustees consist of the Relitanian Deputy Ambassador, and Legit Arnolga. They’re both men of high enough status that any work I do for them will actually have a chance of succeeding.”

“Arnolga. . . ” Stella’s face now wrinkled in concentration, “You mean the old lech from the supreme court?”

“Find me a chaste man who comes to Torei, Stel! He’s a voting member of the Abolition League, and a loyal Amalthean official in good standing. I’d have asked a family member if I still had any, but. . . ”

“No! No. . . he’s a good choice, I guess. So what, he’s given his seal to our case?”

“Effectively. We’re only getting a hearing because of his intervention, really.”

Isolde trotted on, turning down a broad ceremonial boulevard filled with traffic. She found it difficult now to keep the pace set by the automated whips, and her knees no longer kicked high and out of their way in time. It was like losing the rhythm while skipping rope, resulting in repeated sharp stings to her hamstrings. After a dozen misses in a row, an involuntary girly whinny escaped her throat.

“Is there any way we can slow those down for her?” Sophia asked.

“Kammit, we’re going to be late!” Stella groaned, “We need this thing to go *faster!*”

“They’re needlessly cruel, Stel. There’s no way she can go any faster in this. Switch them off.”

Stella sighed and pushed shapes around on the side window, and the whips stopped. Soon after, the cart slowed to a halt in the middle of an enormous crowd of women. Stella leaned out to see an enormous banner being held across the road in front of them, and swore loudly.

“What is it?” Sophie craned her neck.

“Strike action. Looks like the clarkettes are marching grievances all week. They must have chained themselves across the road just before curfew last night.”

Sophie stared out the window as the wall of women rippled outward, threatening a cart pulled by four girls in full pony gear. The man inside was hollering obscenities at them in some antipodean accent, but the combined voices of the women drowned him out with their chants.

Soph marvelled at the mass of humanity, all in identical regulation maroon chastity corsets and gold nipple-medallions. They sat on each others' shoulders, locked in a complicated weave of identical silver laminate arms and legs held together with steel manacles. When they acted, it was as one organism. Any threat to the weave was sequestered and crushed.

"Look at him," Sophie pointed at the screaming man. "He's all of the men of this world. Just one little pecker on a planet full of women. If they all rose up, he'd be red meat for their tables. . ."

The man threw something at the picket line, and the wall drove forward suddenly, lunging and creating a half-dome four or five women high. The man flinched and cowered in his cart, scrambling for the reins and screaming at his ponygirls to back up.

"But that's just it, isn't it? They can no more afford to conquer the men than the Dæmons could pull down the Way Up. They'd bring the whole planet down around their ears. So the best you get is riots over. . ." Stella squinted, ". . . over fellatio pay and on-shift orgasm privileges. Kamn, what a sorry life it must be!"

"Well, you can bet that Gowan will be pressing for more." Sophie gestured to the portraits of the union's benefactor that marked the perimeter. "He's always driven a hard bargain for us."

Isolde suddenly jerked, and the hansom's whips began lashing out in short bursts. The two women shook in the cab, as the ponygirl pranced frantically in search of a new route to their destination.

"I told you to shut—"

"I did! It's punishing her for being late, now. I can't control this!"

Their pony charged at the wall, driven by reflexive obedience to the blinders, and was driven back in terror. Again, she ran forward only to push back again in terror, rear end smarting from the lashing her own cart gave her. Her panicked cries came out as shrill whinnies, at the same time inhuman and immediately communicating human emotion.

"Get us out, Stel! Kammit, *get us out!*"

Gowan was a social reformer, and he travelled the Universe speaking about how he needed help to improve women's lot on Torei. Isolde met him at a fundraising dinner, he bedecked in traditional Mernic costume, and she in a glittering floor-length gown that flaunted her low-gravity body. Their affair was

slow and respectful, building gradually as she accompanied him from engagement to engagement.

Finally, she returned with him to Torei, living as his Free Consort. The pair travelled between his palace grounds in the countryside and his penthouse dwellings at the top of Mernica Tower, near the Way Up. She came to love how Gowan dealt with his slaves and contracts, always letting them relish the pleasures of his lifestyle along with him. She came to love his every tenderness.

But try as she might, he would not divest himself of human property altogether. She never could tell how sincere the women around her were in their gratitude for his kindness. Like a prostitute, their very livelihood depended on being able to please him. A powerful man like Gowan kept powerfully talented actresses in his collection.

The slaves who modified her schedule of Improvements, for their part, had the decency to tell Isolde why they did this to her. For Toreans, the women of this house had the cushiest job imaginable. Isolde's lover, their master, had one of the few unacceptable kinks on Torei: the White Knight fantasy. He wanted to rescue each and every one, and be worshipped as a liberator.

The only person more perverted than him was Isolde. Had she convinced her lover to set loose all the women of his house, they'd be unemployable. Being dismissed from so noble a house was bad enough, but his proclivities made him a terrible reference. The pressure was too great, and Isolde had to go. One afternoon she fell asleep on the table as a slave administered relaxing massage, and woke up in the Adaptation ward of the Mernican branch of the Ministry of Improvements.

The Adapters were stoic Isolates from Dahom: leonine female bodies sealed in the black rubbery glaze of the isolation suit, their heads encased in the featureless obsidian helmets. They worked silently, undistracted by Isolde's hoarse yelling. They communicated without words, and appeared never to rest during the entire three-day operation.

Isolde begged, pleaded, and attempted to bargain with them. She promised them her lover's wealth and influence, her planet's every comfort, and her mind's every secret. Somewhere in the vast atmosphere-generating ziggurat on the South pole, one of Dahom's AI subsystems processed Isolde's words and opted not to send its surgeons the slightest sound of it. They finished the operation with top efficiency.

In the recovery cell, a representative from the Ministry visited her to talk about finance. As a Freewomb, she now bore the costs of the dramatic cosmetic and structural modifications to her body. The man had an enticing proposal: one year in his personal stables participating in all manner of pseudo-equestrian sexual scenarios would settle the accounts neatly. He'd buy out her debt immediately and put her on contract in his house as a show-pony.

Her hands, now balled to fists somewhere within the rubbery fore-hooves, could

no longer operate a screen. The tradition in this situation was for the parties of the contract to seal the pact with intercourse in front of a reliable witness. Isolde chose instead to spit in his face. Her White Knight would be along in no time.

Isolde pulled her carriage forward and backward, twisting and squirming between the whips and the terrifying crowd. The hansom cab rocked back and forth and even side-to-side, one wheel hopping up off the ground at a time as the ponygirl rocked it dangerously about.

Stella stabbed at the glass, searching for anything at all that she could control. Lights surged and dimmed, voices came from speakers inside and out, and bunting flopped down around the roof and retracted in again. Stella swore as she was thrown forward by another retreat from the roaring picket line.

Just when it looked like the stalemate would last forever, Stella shouted and her fingers danced. Maroon and silver bunting burst in a fringe around the cab, and it began to blare a union march from its amplified soundsystem. Sophie squealed and stuck her fingers in her ears, but through a terrified squint she began to see what was happening ahead of her.

The women loomed over them, forming a dome just as they had to the man next to them. But instead of pounding down vengeance upon them, the floor of the half-dome lifted to make an arch over their heads. Isolde spotted the gap and made her break, racing beneath the human bridge and into the courtyard of the old bailey.

Stel thought that Soph's tip for Isolde was excessive even given what the poor ponygirl had just been through, but held her tongue. They raced through the slave's entrance and queued for admission.

With the clarkettes on strike, only automated approvals were getting through, and the number of booths were limited. There were already a few women crying in a corner, no doubt denied for some critical hearing. Stella and Sophia squeezed together into a booth and let the doors seal shut.

"Slave Sophietta, property of the Relitanian-Amalthean Peace Envoy, you are granted entry by the writ of Legit Arnolga. Slut Stellanova, you are named as legal counsel in the writ, but are currently disqualified from court appearance due to irregularities in your outstanding contracts. Resolve your contractual status and try again."

"Stel?" Soph looked worried, "I know what you're thinking. Don't do it!"

Stella swore, and slammed a fist against the solid metal over her stomach. "There's no time for getting this right!" she then spoke to the screen, "I am at

large on parole, automatically enforced. I submit my status to court mediation, at any time following the resolution of Sophietta's hearing."

The system blinked softly to indicate consultation and coordination of multiple automated minds, and then the far gate opened. The pair spilled out of the booth and stumbled, arm-in-arm, down the corridor.

"Aaah!" Stella squealed, "Nono, not this way! Ooh, kannn!"

Soph looked concerned, "What?"

"No, I'm fine, it's just—Aaah!" She cradled the metal domes around her breasts as if protecting them from something, "My parole belt wants me to go straight to the courtroom."

Rather than say anything, Soph just hooked her arm around Stel's elbow and followed her lead through the complex. Occasionally Stel would jump back or aside from the sting of some invisible whip, and Soph did her best to keep her ex-wife standing and moving on.

They made it to the courtroom early, and waited outside until the session let out. A plump man with a big smile on his face practically danced as he walked out. In one hand he held a leather strap, the other end of which was a metal ring to which six chains attached. On the opposite end of these chains walked six dour women with beautiful Amalthean features. Their arms were bound about their waists by strict rubbery corset-straitjackets, emphasizing their exposed breasts.

Stel swore, "That was *Delitra!* Kammit! I *dated* her!"

Soph again held her tongue, and just laid her hand on Stella's. She squeezed gently, and put an arm around her shoulder.

Once the crowd thinned out, the two women filed in and knelt in the Petitioner's Circle. They were alone, as even the magister seemed to have gone to chambers. Stella's breath was short and heavy, and she fidgeted and fumbled trying to get their documents up for a last-minute review.

"Stel, are you all right?"

"No, I'm fine, really. This is—" Stella sighed, and gasped sharply, "The kannn thing is. . . *teasing.*" She pounded her fist against the rectangle of clear plastic that lay on the ground before her.

Sophie looked down to see that instead of their papers, the device had a timer counting down the seconds until the hearing began. Beside it scrolled the alternating messages, "**GOOD GIRLS ARE PUNCTUAL.**" and "**OBEY THE LAW, AND BE REWARDED!**" Stel moaned, her eyes half-lidded.

Sophie looked around nervously, feeling helpless. She cradled Stella in her arms, and soon she found herself locked in an old familiar kiss. The timer visible in the corner of her eye, she permitted herself to surrender to longing and nostalgia

as if it were no more than five extra minutes of sleep in the morning. People were arriving now, and Soph broke the kiss with a blush and a downward gaze.

Stel, for her part, struggled to straighten herself out as well, despite the stimulation. Catching her breath, she whispered a hushed “Thank you.” out of the corner of her mouth.

Sophie sighed, “I never should have let you go.”

Stel just bit her lip and turned away, not wanting to let Soph see any tears.

Sophie continued, “I could tell that you needed so much more than I could give. I mean, I tried. . . You just always held back. I never understood. . . I mean, did you have too much respect for me or something?” She coughed, and wrung her hands on her lap. “Well, anyway. . . I realized that I was the only thing on this whole planet that was keeping you from exploring all those corners of yourself. I was the one who kept you from realizing your own true nature.”

“Soph, *please*. . .” Stella choked, stifling a sob.

“No, I need to say this. You have to understand that I wasn’t just blowing smoke when I told you that I did it because I love you. You were just so. . . unfinished, back then. You had so much ahead of you, and I want you to have it all.”

Stella wiped tears from her cheeks and sniffled, “So that’s it, then? You broke my heart to save it? Well thank you very much. I’m sure I’ve grown marvellously thanks to that.”

“Stella please, stop fighting and look at yourself. Can’t you see that you have? You’re no longer the wild kid I married, but a fierce driven woman all your own. And really, admit it: you did have some fun being single here, didn’t you?”

Stel set her jaw, self-consciously aiming her gaze at the ceiling.

Sophie cracked a slight grin, “Or did I not hear a tale of a certain bridgemaiden and a modified bureau?”

Stel did her best to keep the giggles down, but ultimately couldn’t hold back the broad grin. “I guess I did have some great times, now and again.” She sniffed again, but no more tears were falling.

“I’m glad you did, Stel. And once this is all over, once we have the twins back and we’re uncollared and unbelted, I hope we can try having good times together again.”

“I. . . I’d like that.” Stella’s broad grin softened to a loving smile. “I’d like that more than anything.”

The women embraced again, but before they could do or say much more the timer ticked to zero and a man in a maroon laminate catsuit strode to the bench, carrying a matching helmet under one arm. The two women immediately bowed forward to touch their foreheads to the floor, wrists crossed behind their backs.

“Petitioners, beg for relief.” The man seemed bored.

The two women straightened and laid their hands on their knees, palms face-up in a pose of supplication. Stel spoke first.

“Sagacity, we are honoured to have your ear. We seek the release of two freewombs under Relitanian protection. Per our filing, we are entitled to ruling-by-peer-group through declaration 74 of the—”

“I am familiar with the document.” he interrupted, clearly unhappy with the situation, “So, your little treaty insists I assemble eleven of your peers to decide on my own ruling?”

“Yes, sagacity.”

“And you assert that the Truants in our care are, in fact, Freewombs held against their rights?”

“We do, sagacity.”

“Answer me carefully, now. Are you advocates of the off-world model of human equality?”

Stella ground her teeth, but knew that lying would get them nowhere. “We are from the Relitanian-Amalthean Peace Envoy, which seeks equality for all.”

“And yet this envoy possesses this slave-petitioner, and you who speak for them are yourself in possession of three slaves.”

Sophietta dared not turn her head, but Stel could see her eyelashes flare open at the report of the number of slaves she’d purchased.

“We work respectfully within the structure of Torean laws and customs, no matter our ultimate goals, sagacity.”

The Magister leaned back in his high seat, rubbing his erection thoughtfully through the laminate sheath he wore around it. A devilish sneer slowly crossed his face.

“Well events transpire that I happen to have eleven peers for petitioners of your stature, and the Ministry has already approved them. Place your consent on the floor and they may enter.”

Stella looked down at the rectangle on the floor and reached forward to select consent for the case to be tried at the whim of the 11 peers. The Magister rubbed himself and gasped with what seemed like erotic glee, and then the door opened.

Eleven men in dark laminate catsuits and heavy boots marched in, their eyes made up with dark eyeliner and various whips and chains and other implements hung over their bodies on belts or bandoliers. They sat in a semicircle to the side of the Magister’s bench, and grinned at the astonished petitioners.

“The Ministry’s representatives for Status Quo are on their way now. When they arrive, your case will be decided by your fellow slaveowners. Thank me for my Justice.”

Stel couldn’t speak, the lustful glares of the Torean men pinning her to the floor, but Sophietta took a shaky breath and squeaked out.

“Thank you, Sagacity. Your Justice and Wisdom honour us.”

The Magister laughed as a door behind them opened, and the Ministry’s team walked in.