

Stella of the Bailey

Gospodin

2012

Diplomatic Crisis

“Stel, I know you completed all the work I gave you for the negotiations today, but I need an enormous favor from you.”

Sophia had sent the message with a special emergency flag that Stella had given her, causing it to flash up on all of the mirrors and windows in her flat, as well as blinking an alert on all her personal cards. Stella set down the glass of wine she'd poured to celebrate the completion of the contract and the coming weekend, and mashed a fingertip against the words “CALL BACK” on the vanity mirror.

Stella's reflection was replaced by a scene of total chaos in Sophia's office. Men and women in smart business attire ran back and forth carrying boxes of supplies and personal effects, and members of the Amalthean national guard were conferring in groups, readying weapons and mobilizing toward exits.

“Sophie! Are you nearby? It's Stel. I got your note!”

The scene of confusion and panic continued, and finally a young man in a striped shirt and waistcoat noticed Stella and waved to someone off-screen. A few seconds later, Sophia's face filled the mirror, her eyes betraying total despair.

“Oh Stella, listen. It's all gone horribly wrong! The tripartite negotiations today were a stitch-up. Someone knew everything we had going on, and the others just completely steamrolled us. Amalthea and the other disputed worlds are no longer part of the Commonweal, and we're nowhere near meeting the requirements to confederate with your people. All Amalthean nationals on Torei are now completely without protection of the Interstellar Act, and the Ministry of Truants already had its forces ready for this.”

Sophia took a deep breath, holding her forehead in her hand, as if to hold her weary face upright for a minute longer. “We're protected for now here in the embassy, but there are 403 women without legal guardians currently at large in the offworlders' complex. We've alerted nearly all of them to head for the nearest friendly embassy, but there are two we can't reach.”

Stella realized that her mouth was open the whole time she'd been listening. She quickly snapped to attention, pursing her lips, straightening her posture,

and tugging her glossy dressing gown into a more modest décolletage.

“Right, what do you need from me?”

“Stel, It’s the twins.”

Minutes later, Stella had thrown her casual work attire back on and run to the nearest lift. Alem’s tower (where Sophia and most other Amaltheans lived) did not have a skybridge to the space elevator yet, so her fastest route was to catch an express train in the ground levels of her own home tower. She used to make this trip more frequently, back when she and Sophia had been an item, but her destination seemed light years away, now.

Stella paced on the platform amidst a motley crew of off-world pleasure-seekers, native-born businessmen, and enticingly dressed slaves and local freewombs in all stages of bondage or exposure. She spent so much of her attention fussing over the arrival estimates for her train that she was on board and seated on the bench before she noticed the Truant Officers boarding her carriage.

The men wore the maroon and gold uniforms of the International Truancy Bureau, and both officers sported the Alemic Ensign on their epaulets. The crowd parted for them as they stepped on, dragging a chain of four casually-dressed women between them.

The women were bound in glittering steel fiddles, wrists held together in front of their faces by the rods coming from their metal collars. Each girl’s fiddle was bound to the collar of the woman in front of her, and the stiff bar the four yokes made caused them to stumble and step on one another’s feet as they walked.

Stella could not make out the identity of any of the four women, as their heads were all covered in well-oiled maroon leather hoods with brass buckles. Their muffled moans and wails suggested terror and a gradual loss of resistance. Stella stared in horror as she realized who these women must be.

“So, what’s yer name, clit?”

Stel’s heart pounded as she realized that one of the truant officers had sat down next to her on the bench, the line of women stretched in front of them as if for their inspection.

“Stellanova.” She replied curtly, swallowing hard.

“Oooh, Stella-nova, eh? Barq, that sounds like an Amalthean name, doncha-think?”

“I dunno, all them funny names sound alike to me.” Barq muttered, fussing with a card in one hand while he held a leash attached to the front girl’s fiddle, “I’ve got one for a ‘Stelleana’, but no Stellanova. Sorry, boss!”

“Are you sure you got that name right, clit? I bet them long words are hard for you to wrap your mouth around sometimes. If you like I’ve got something

simpler for your mouth to try out..." The seated guard had pulled the strings of his maroon trousers, revealing his cock to the whole carriage.

Stella knew what was coming, and fumbled for her passport and emancipation reference as a pre-emptive measure.

"Here's my ID, Sir. My parents were from Amalthea, but I was born on Hotchkiss and have confederate citizenship."

The guard cinched his codpiece back on with a quick flutter of laces, and his face took on a darker aspect.

"All right, all right. Not to worry, we won't touch your 'feddy cunt without asking. But if you want, we'd be willing to overlook your accident of birth and let you join your sisters, here. Make something nice out of you, I'd expect."

Stella tried to stare forward, between the waists of the captured girls to an entertained passenger on the other side.

"No thank you, Sir."

"Or... I tell you what. You step in for one of these... terrified young ladies, and we let her go at the next station, hmm? I'll let you pick which one you want, even. Maybe you'd like to walk in front, show off that lovely chest you're covering up, eh?"

Stella's stomach turned. She knew it was all lies, and that those four women were going to Alem's Ministry of Truants no matter what she did. She also knew that even with witnesses testifying to her agreement to the plan, the Confederacy had enough power that she'd be free again before bedtime. It was a non-choice, but what ate at her gut was the image in her head of Sophia's twin nieces being hauled off because Stel had tangled with an officer of the law.

"No."

The officer grinned and leaned over to the third captive from the front, hiking her skirt up over her hips. The girl's hands balled into fists above the cuffs of her fiddle, and she stood pigeon-toed. From within her hood, Stel could hear muffled throaty protests.

The man then reached up and pulled the poor girl's panties down to her knees in one quick motion. With expert grace he slapped her thigh and pulled the knickers off completely while she squirmed.

"See? This one's a blonde like you, although I'll never understand why you people don't depilate properly. I bet the processor would just notarize you under her passport and you'd be in."

The man held the crumpled panties to his nose and inhaled deeply, eyes lidding over as if savoring a unique experience. He gasped with satisfaction, and then tossed them onto Stella's lap.

"No? Well then here's a memento of this womb's last day of freedom!"

Stel was fuming, but trying her hardest not to let them get to her. The standing guard was grinning ear to ear like some sort of simpleton, and one of the businessmen standing by the train door had been making pantomime kisses and winking at her. Even some of the slaves were licking their lips and batting their eyelids in her direction.

Stella breathed evenly through her nose for six breaths, then politely handed the underwear back to the sitting officer.

“I will not take you up on your offer. Please put these back where you found them.”

The man took them and gave them another appreciative sniff.

“Kamn, the smell of fear in these! It’s... well it’s why I love this job!”

He un-bunched the garment and dangled it in front of Stella’s face.

“All right, womb. I’ll put them back on her. Whatever you say!”

He fished in a bag at his belt and pulled out a miniscule rubbery cylinder of some kind. Palming it, he pulled the panties up to the squirming captive’s knees, and then his colleague helped him hold her legs as far apart as the stretchy fabric would allow. He pulled out a tiny tube and squeezed a drop of some gel into the cylinder before reaching between the poor girl’s legs and rubbing with it.

The captive girl jerked against the men holding her legs, but they held her up. The officer teased out her clitoris, and then squeezed the cylinder, causing the aperture to widen considerably. He shoved it on and let go, and with a wet popping sound, it sucked her sensitive nub in and held tight.

The officer pulled up the panties and lowered the skirt back down to cover the girl’s thighs. The moment the two men let go, her knees snapped together. Stella was beyond caring that the truant officers could tell she had been staring at the performance.

“You know what, womb? I think I misjudged you.”

Stella briefly caught his gaze and immediately regretted it.

“Yeah, I don’t think you’re cut out for a slave’s life. No, you’re one of those freewomb types who goes out buying a little harem of your own, aren’t you? I think once these four are booked and processed, you might want to buy a couple of them at auction.”

Stella’s face felt hot, and she knew her pale blonde’s complexion must have turned beet red. The brute’s words hit too close to home, and given her mission and what stood before her, she had no response.

“Don’t worry, my precious little freewomb...” The man pulled out a card and aimed it at the third captive, tapping sigils on the clear plastic. “I’ll make sure she’s given a velvet collar. She’ll be conditioned for pleasure, ready to become your next girlfriend. You’ll have her tongue at your command, and she...”

The officer flicked the last control, and the pigeon-toed girl jolted in her bonds. Her hood shook left and right as she realized what the button was doing, and her thighs began to rub together as she ground her hips.

“...she will enjoy pleasures of her own!”

Stella recognized the device on the girl’s clit as a vibrator. The goo must have been one of the myriad devilish stimulatory creams that could be bought in any convenience store on Torei. Stella watched the woman writhe in arousal and humiliation, and found herself half wishing for a little stimulation on her own erogenous areas.

Enough time passed without anyone saying anything, and Stella felt acutely aware of everyone’s gaze again. Her silence was a little victory for the smug truancy enforcer, and she wanted nothing more than to kick and punch and scratch at him until his head caved in.

Stella’s public display of self-pity was cut mercifully short, though, when the announcement for Alem Tower station came over the loudspeakers. Stella stood up and walked over to the doors, her back to the carriage, her eyes wrinkled shut to match her grinding teeth.

The train pulled into Alem Tower Station with perfect grace, and the doors on the opposite side of the carriage from Stella opened to the platform. Stella turned to head out, and watched the two truant enforcers drag their quarry off the train. Anxiety knotting her stomach, she watched the row of women stumble blindly on, guided only by the tug of the leash on their wrists and necks.

The third woman, the one that the officer had ministered to personally, was clearly stumbling worse than the others. She ground her hips as she walked, lifting her knees high and rubbing it across the opposite thigh. As Sophia had taught her during their time together, you didn’t need to be in the mood to be aroused on Torei: there was always a way to make you ready for sex.

The other three captives had to work that extra bit harder to carry the squirming girl’s weight from time to time, and she received a disproportionate amount of attention from the crops the enforcers carried. Stella nearly missed getting off the train before the doors closed, she was so distracted. Her fears and anxieties were giving way to arousal at the sight of the women being controlled in this way. She almost did wish she could buy them for herself.

Stella barged into Sophie’s apartment, calling their names out.

“Dimi! Cali! Kammit *please* be here!”

She got no response, but then again she wasn’t actually expecting to see them there. The real reason she had stopped in was to make use of a spy she’d planted in a fit of jealousy over a year ago. Pulling out a glass card, she brought up the soubrette’s control application and got a display of her current location.

Stel marched over to the linen closet and threw open the door, revealing a

slavegirl in a glossy black latex maid's uniform straddling the cylindrical clothes-washing machine. It was one of the old-fashioned kind that used ultrasound to break up oils in fabrics, and the girl was clearly enjoying some sort of effect from the humming tub between her legs. It was difficult to tell too much, however, because of the black rubber scold's mask that formed a posture collar over her neck and mouth.

Stella traced her fingers over the card, and the girl's eyes fluttered open as the mask retreated down under her chin, making an audible *pop* as a cylindrical protrusion retracted from her mouth.

"Ohhhh, ank ou istwess!" the maid gasped, her jaw still stretched wide from being accustomed to the wide plug that had likely filled her mouth for the past month.

"Where are they?"

"Nistwess?" the girl drooled, working her jaw with painful-sounding pops and clicks as she tried to bring her teeth together.

"The twins, kammit! Where did they go?"

The maid had been a gift from Stella to Sophia, shortly after they broke up. Stella had specifically ordered them a soubrette, trained to spy and gossip and generally get into mischief so as to earn punishments later. At the time she had thought it would be the perfect revenge: she'd distract her ex-lover with an irresistible coquette, and have a gossipy slavegirl to interrogate about Sophie's love life. In the end, though, the desire for revenge softened to an occasional pang of regret. For her part, Sophie just let the girl do the cleaning and left her stored away in neglect most of the time.

"Mistresses Dimiza and Caliopa went out to celebrate their 18th birthday, ma'am." The slave smacked her indelibly-red lips as she recovered control of her mouth.

Stel's heart sank.

"Where? Where did they go? Tell me, you worthless cunt!"

"They didn't say, Mistress! But one of their friends—the stuck-up Peladian princess with the family cocklock? She said she knew one of the bouncers at Venus in Furs and they'd let the twins in a few hours before they're legal."

"Venus? Kamn! I just hope I can find them before the truant squad does."

"WAAAAI-NGKHPHHH" Stel had switched the maid's gag-mask back on, and was nearly out the door. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she re-released the soubrette's mouth from the mask's enormous gag and turned to hear her out.

"Ghkkaagh! Ah, thank you Mistress! I only want to warn you that you'll never get in on a busy night like tonight the way you're dressed!"

Stella hated to admit it, but the slave had a point. She bit her lip thoughtfully and tapped her toe as if shaking her head would change things, but then just threw up her hands in exasperation. Five minutes later she had raided Sophie's wardrobe as well as that of the twins to assemble a proper clubbing ensemble.

"Right, how about this?" she strutted in front of the maid, turning once on the toe of her black patent knee-high shitkicker boots. The silver sheen of her metallic-look glossy stockings disappeared beneath a skirt made of wide black straps festooned with wide steel studs and laced together with silver cables.

Above her bare midriff Stella was contained by a silvery bodice laced moderately tightly behind her back. The cups of the bodice were themselves straps laced together with black monofilament cord, squashing her C-cup breasts up and together into a plush V of cleavage. Just above the cleavage sat a mirrored black stone in a silver pendant setting. Her makeup and hair were pure elegant vamp: blood red lips, black-lined eyes with smoked lids, and black hair pinned up in set curls.

Without benefit of modern technology, she'd have wasted an hour on the ensemble, but Toreans were masters of the quick costume change and every boudoir could turn a mouse into a princess in seconds.

"It'll get you past the bouncers," the maid mused, "but I'd have gone for teaser-top stockings and left the skirt unlaced."

"Yes," Stella bit her words, her mind already focusing on what she'd do to the twins once she found them, "I suppose *you* would."

She punched the maid's gag back on and stabbed the laundry machine button with her thumb, sending it into an extra-high cycle. She didn't stop to watch the maid's eyes roll back into her head with pleasure, but grabbed a fur coat and bolted out of the apartment.

The queue for Venus went around the corner, scandalously costumed partygoers chattering away and waiting for their turn. Stella walked the length of it twice, squinting at women in hoods and domino masks, trying to see if any of them were Dimi or Cali. Satisfied that they weren't waiting outside, she folded two large-denomination notes and tucked one in the garter of her stocking and the other snugly between her breasts.

"I think you'll find that I'm on the list," she said boldly, stepping in the front of the queue. She pulled her fur coat open slightly, granting the man a glimpse of the currency in her cleavage. The bouncer smiled and made a show of checking his list and making a tick mark before gesturing to the coat check window.

Stel shrugged off the enormous fur cloak and passed it through the window, collecting the token code on the stone in her pendant. Following the bouncer's instructions, she spread her feet shoulder width apart and reached up to grab the bar over her head. The bouncer reached down and slowly frisked her.

His heavy hands moved quickly over her right boot, but slowed dramatically on reaching the smooth material of her stockings. Stella sighed slightly as she realized that she'd stuck the payoff into the left stocking, and that he'd do the full measure before finding it. Sure enough, he reached the top of the right stocking, feeling the top with both hands before running a finger over the front of her panties and tracing a line over her slit.

It was degrading, but as a young woman on Torei she had once been accustomed to the process. She and Sophia had come to this particular club countless times in their more golden years, and somehow it had never seemed like anything more than a frustrating imposition. Now all Stella could think of was how the Truant officer on the train had teased and molested that woman. She bit her lip and did not exhale until the bouncer had found the money.

He wasn't finished, though. He stepped around in front and ran his fingers under the edge of her bodice, running his hands up her curves. Finally he plucked the money from her bosom and gave her rump a playful swat to signal that she was allowed to step inside. Stella lowered her arms and took long strides toward the interior door, wondering if the bouncer's thick hands had felt anything from the steel spikes he had just slapped.

As is the tradition, the dance club was dark and smoky. The lights were flashy and the music was rhythmic and loud, but something about the place had always struck Stella as a bit fake. It was really another example of Toreans trying to import an off-world tradition, getting it right in the details, but missing some essential premise of the experience.

For starters, most of the women out on the dance floor were clearly owned by the establishment, and performed cleverly synchronized ensemble dances somewhere between the traditions of Torean court dances and more free-spirited off-world club moves. The bar had trouble accepting payments for drinks, instead being set up to lease out private rooms and cubicles for time with the dancing girls. The go-go cages, something you'd expect a Torean to understand implicitly, often lay empty due to Torei's lack of any dance tradition that involved staying in one spot for any length of time.

Stella scanned the crowd as she headed toward the bar, hoping to make it before some eager young man tried to start courtship maneuvers on her. She'd always been with Sophie when she came before, but even a freewomb alone in a club had to be careful with the law. Torei was still not sure where single free women fit into society, and they were regularly found guilty of crimes like "immodesty" or "teasing".

It seemed luck was with her, though, as she reached the bar without any deliberate gropes or pinches, and nobody had grabbed her or stood in her way.

"One hour of light spirits," she ordered, holding out her pendant for payment.

The bar attendant only shook her head, making a hand gesture indicating that Stella didn't need to pay for any drinks that evening. Stella nearly dropped the

necklace in surprise.

“What? But I only just arrived! Who?”

The slave behind the bar simply gestured with one glitter-covered arm to a man standing to Stella’s left.

“Hello, clit. Have a few on me. I paid for your entire evening!”

Stella felt heavy, as though she were sinking into herself. The music of the club was still loud, but seemed far off in the distance. Her tunnel vision made the sight of the truant officer in front of her seem almost reassuringly distant, but there was no escaping him now. After what felt like an hour, she swallowed and blinked her senses back to normal.

“What do you want?” Stella croaked, worried he wouldn’t hear her over the noise. The man grinned.

“Oh, I want to help you, Freewomb Stellanova!” the man chuckled, “I hear you’re looking for something important, and I want to tell you how you can find it.”

He held out a stemmed glass of blue liquor to Stella with one hand, and grabbed her upper arm with the other, ushering her away from the bar.

“I’ve reserved a private room where we can...discuss this,” he whispered into her ear, guiding the stunned woman toward a door along the far wall. Stella could not think of any way to give this man the slip without landing herself a humiliating sentence from a magister, so she bit her lip and allowed herself to be dragged into the room.

The scene inside did not surprise her entirely. Slavegirls danced, women sat cross-legged on men’s laps, drinks and empty glasses covered every horizontal surface, and the whole room stank of aphrodesiac pheromone sprays. What caused Stella’s jaw to drop was the sight of two identical blondes dressed in neck-to-toe black latex catsuits, learning chain-dance routines from a pair of manacled slaves.

“Dimi! Cali! We’ve got to go! Oh kamn, I thought I wouldn’t find you! It’s not safe right now. You’ve frightened your Aunt half to death!”

The two girls, in unison, rolled their eyes at each other.

“Stel, why d’you always have to be such a kamn *drama queen*, huh?” Dimiza spoke first, “We’re not children any more, and Auntie Sophie can’t run our lives. You can’t even run *her* life now, you selfish cow!”

“No, *listen to me!* I know you need your rebellion and your girls’ night out and your freedom and your independence. No, I *get* that, okay? I’m just saying that your legal status is about to get *very* complicated in the next hour or so, and we need to get you two to friendly soil as quickly as possible.”

Stella didn't get an answer immediately, because a loud keening sound from a pile of cushions distracted everybody at just that moment. Stella turned to see Princess Palcha of Peladderum bring herself to orgasm with some sort of tool jammed into her royal chastity device. A man with a familiar smug grin on his face knelt next to the girl, and Stella realized he was the other truant officer she'd met on the train that day.

"We're not out alone, Stel." Dimi gestured to the curling toes that had drawn everyone's attention. "There's royal guards on the dance floor, and more outside. We should have had them stop you from entering, but I never thought you'd go this far to spoil our birthday."

"Guards, *schmards!*" Stella spat, "That woman isn't as free or as powerful as you think she is, and her family would sell you to Queios just to protect the lineage. You're two lambs in the wolves' den, and if you don't want to find yourselves on the state auction block tomorrow you *need* to come with me right now!"

"You were right, Dimi." Caliopa sneered, "Total drama queen and control freak. You may have been able to manipulate Auntie Sophie for a while with this kind of secret law club crap, but we've seen it all before. We're safe and in good company—or at least we were before *you* showed up."

"Kammit Cali," Stella waved to the men in the room, "These guys are *truant officers!* Why do you think they'd want to play with a bunch of stuck-up off-worlders like you?"

"We relish their spontaneity and free spirit," the officer who'd bought Stella's drink recited, as if it were a well-known quote. "Why else would we take a job working with the ones who run?"

"Really, Cali? You buy that pap? Dimi?"

The twins each grabbed one of the man's elbows, and began rubbing their latex-gloved hands over his ruffled shirt. They played footsie with their glossy knees a bit, and glared smugly at Stella.

"Planetside lesbian can't believe in a man who loves strong women!" Cali cooed.

"Headlines after the sponsors!" Dimi completed the joke.

"And what," the man smiled down at their two smirking faces, "can I do to make you two happy?"

"Take her out of here, Gird. She's ruining our birthday."

The man released the two girls and held out an elbow to Stella.

"It's what they want, and the Princess will back it up. C'mon, it's quieter at the balcony bar."

Stella glared daggers at Dimiza and Caliope.

“This isn’t over, girls. And when it is, all the I-told-you-so in the world won’t help any of us.”

The balcony bar had a glass bottom looking down on the dance floor. Stella stood at one of the high drink tables and looked Gird squarely in the eyes. She quietly refused the second drink as she had the first, and waited for him to speak.

“All right, you want me to tell you what I’m up to, here. I suppose that as my date, you’re entitled to at least that. Agreed?”

Stella just nodded, her cold stare not leaving his eyes.

“So after you got off my train and we’d processed those fresh cunts, I had another look at the search Barq had done for your name. Seemed you were single but some records still showed you as cohabitating with a one Ambassadors Sophietta of Amalthea. I don’t know if you appreciate what you’ve lost, but it seems she’s quite the prized commodity this week. Had you registered as her Mistress or even listed her as your Free Servant you would have had a stake in this game. She’d have earned you quite the tidy sum at the markets!”

Stella’s palms ached, she realized, because her fists were clenched tightly enough to drive the nails in. Gird sipped his drink thoughtfully before continuing.

“So you know, those twins were right. The royal guards are really good at their job, here. We’ve got a fair few spies with your people, but those guys don’t mess around. There’s no way we could snatch them from that room while they’re in the company of the Princess. It’d look too much like a threat to her safety, and we’d probably end up with neat holes in our heads before anyone stopped to work out what was actually happening.” Gird took a long pull from his own drink, and ordered a third to sit next to Stella’s untouched second.

“I think what you need to worry about, Stellanova, is how this date ends between us. I know from your file that you’re not big on men, but we’re at a point here where you need to determine how you’ll make me happy enough to keep your record clean.”

Stella glared.

“What do you have in mind... *Sir?*”

“Oh, you don’t want to know what sort of fun fills my mind, clit. I’ve got a job that has me catching other people’s meat all day, and never a taste for us! They try, sometimes, to bargain their way out, but that won’t work on folks in my profession.

“No, we’re hand-picked to be the most twisted and sadistic cocks since KITA. Kamn, if I didn’t have this job I’d probably spend my spare time catching and vivisecting them for fun. But society gives you rules to work with, and this was my Righteous Aptitude.”

Jaw firmly set, Stella refused to let her eyes veer from his.

“Of course, if you’d love to come around my place for a genuinely mind-bending experience, that offer is of course open. But I know your type well enough by now to know that that’s not the slave role you’d be best at.”

Gird swirled the last of his drink in the bottom of his glass.

“So let’s review the ledger: you’re on obligation for the drinks, the information leading to the location of your friends, and the charming company of a high-ranking snatchatcher. To this point, all you have given me in return is your stuck-up offworld wannabe-mistress act—which, I am now officially informing you, is simply not my kink.” He tipped his head back and swallowed the last of the liquor with a gulp, setting the empty glass down next to Stella’s full one. “Agreed?”

Stella’s professional training kicked in.

“You’ll get an easy register on the drinks and time spent, but the information would never hold up in court. The Peladian guards blend in well, but anyone who knew Palcha was here could have spotted that party in moments.”

Gird nodded his head sideways in thoughtful agreement.

“All right clit, then for the drinks and my escort I only ask for two things: your clothes, and that you stay to watch a show from this glassbox.”

“Time watching the show can’t incur future obligation,” Stella fired back, relying on instincts born from years of reading contracts. “And no to the clothes.”

“Agreed on the time. This agreement will be complete and binding.” Gird bared teeth with his smile, relishing the word *binding*. “But I need a keepsake. Say, a lock of your hair?”

“You don’t honestly think I’ll fall for that old trick, do you? No hair or other legal tokens of flirtation. Try again.”

“All right then,” Gird shrugged, as though it didn’t mean anything to him, “half your clothes. Everything below the waist.”

“Everything below the thigh.” Stella was in no mood to escort the twins out with her sex bared, but that seemed to be what Gird was zeroing in on. “You get stockings, boots, and toe rings.”

“Toe rings?” Gird seemed thrown off balance, “Why would you wear toe rings with boots? No, I want the skirt and briefs.”

Stella took in a short breath and squinted at the man. He was genuinely only interested in humiliating her.

“And what makes you think I’m wearing briefs?”

Gird’s grin vanished, and his official nonchalance returned.

“I told you, I know the type of slave you’d make.”

Stella shook her head in disgust.

“All right, yes to the briefs, but I keep the skirt.”

“I get the briefs,” Gird leaned down, hovering over her. “And the laces from the skirt. Anything less and I’ll just call this in right now. See if I don’t!”

Stella knew she’d fought this one as best she could, and that he’d probably known he’d get exactly this from the moment he ordered her the drinks. Yanking the pendant off with her fist, she held it up to complete the transaction.

“Done. And as you said, this represents the entirety of our relationship for today.”

Gird pulled a transparent card from his belt and held it to the stone, glowing figures authenticating the contract between them. Once the deal was done, Gird raised one eyebrow and asked a question as though it were the least important thing in the world.

“This is the earliest you’ve ever signed off before, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose it is. Why?”

Gird just shrugged and reached down to begin unlacing the cord that held Stella’s skirt together. The silver “X” stitches came out smoothly, and soon the black leathery straps hung loosely like a pleated skirt, allowing occasional glances of pale flesh beneath.

Gird slipped his fingers through two of the gaps, found purchase on a bit of cloth, and pulled down. Stella helped him do it as quickly as possible, and stepped out of the garment as best the platform soles of her boots would allow. It was a contractual obligation, and she knew that any reluctance or hesitation would only give him what he wanted.

“Plain white fabric. I was so right about you.” Gird folded the garment and matter-of-factly tucked it in a pocket on his belt.

“All right then, what’s this show you want me to watch?”

“Come with me to the front of the balcony. It’s the best view in the place, and it’s going to start any minute now.”

They walked to the front of the glass balcony, and Gird shoved aside a couple engaged in some rather exhibitionistic games. Stella stood beside him and nervously watched as a magic act started on the main stage above the dance floor.

It was a performer she’d seen before, and he did the usual routines of sawing women in two or making birdcages disappear. She’d gone up once before as a volunteer, and he’d done a trick where she found herself wearing a straitjacket that had been on one of the club slaves a moment before. The man was good, though, and she still had no idea how he’d done it so quickly.

“And for our last trick of the evening, I will need a few volunteers!”

The spotlights scanned the crowd, finally settling on a group of women dressed mostly in catsuits. Stella wasn't sure, but she thought she saw Palcha parting from the group and waving the rest up encouragingly.

As they climbed onto the stage, Stella began to make them out. One, a woman in a black rubber pencil skirt and knee-high ballet boots. Another in a powder blue glossy lolita dress with wide skirts and striped wet-look stockings. The third was in a collection of black straps joined by silver rings, exposing a variety of colorful skin art. And bringing up the rear were two identical blondes in full-coverage black catsuits.

“Dimi! Cali! Kammit no! Get out of there!” Stella banged on the glass but it made no sound. The crowd beneath seemed not to notice her outburst at all. The magician kept at his act.

“Let's give these sexy freewombs a round of applause!” The girls all struck poses and hammed it up for the crowd.

Stella turned to run back down to get them, but Gird caught her arm.

“Remember your contract, clit. You go down there, and you learn what breach is like with the kind of guys they pick for the snatch hunts! You'd be no good to them after that, I *promise* you.”

Stella's ears pounded, and she turned around slowly, allowing herself to be dragged back to the front window. She tried her best to pay attention to the act.

“...and then you can let go of your tits and hold the last bit of chain for me—that's a good girl!”

Stella's vision clouded, and she found it hard to blink the tears away. Finally she reached up and wiped her eyes with her hands, not caring if Gird saw.

“...then over your heads and—LIFE! Now where did that chain go?”

The women on stage were laughing, most of them holding up their hands in amazement that the chain they all held had simply vanished from their grasp.

“...now you two are clearly hiding something! What have you got behind your backs, aside from a matched pair of gorgeous arses?”

Stella groaned as the twins turned around, still laughing, to reveal the chain binding their arms together behind their backs. Each girl's elbows touched, and about two metres of the chain went from one pair of wrists to the other.

“...my pretties, I was worried that you Freewombs weren't as flexible as our proper slaves, but I can see that I had nothing to fear!”

Stella's groan had grown to a high keening noise, and she realized she was moaning “Come *on* come *on*!” over and over. Punching the clear wall again,

she tried to breathe evenly. The show was nearly over, and the delusional part of her mind wanted to believe that Gird would merely humiliate her, then let her whisk the twins to safety.

Stella realized she hadn't been paying attention when two enormous novelty cakes were wheeled to either side of the girls, who were still bound together by the magician's chain. Clock bells rang midnight over the sound system, followed by a celebratory fanfare. The twins looked over their shoulders at each other as if they were having the time of their lives. And then the cakes burst open.

The tops flipped up on a hinge, and two men in maroon and gold uniforms stood straight. In unison, they each lifted a metal device and thrust it at the neck of one girl. Collars snapped shut around their throats, blonde hair trapped beneath. At this point the magician stepped between the girls and removed the chain from their arms in one swift motion.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” The girls finally looked up at Stella, who was screaming from the transparent balcony. Someone had switched the sound system's feed to a pickup in the glassbox, and the spotlights had converged on Stella. The crowd watched and listened as she screamed and bashed on the window.

The twins down on the stage finally looked worried, and reached up to grab the metal rod that went from their necks to the hands of the truant officers. The men twisted something, and cuffs snapped around the girls' wrists, leaving them in precisely the sort of fiddle Stella had seen on the train earlier.

The twins began to squirm and pull at their bonds, but the truant officers stepped out of the cakes without losing their grips. The twins screamed and struggled, one nearly losing her footing and having to pull herself back up by the cuffs that imprisoned her. The two officers pulled maroon bundles off their belts and pressed a clear bulb between the teeth of each girl.

“Well girls, a happy 18th to the both of you! Before you go, I just have one birthday message here from a Freewomb named Stellanova. It reads: ‘I TOLD YOU SO!’”

A flick of the wrist, and the truant enforcers had the head of each girl wrapped in a heavy leather hood. Stella suddenly lost strength in her legs, and collapsed down into a squat, hugging her knees. She gazed down into the spotlights, hoping that they would blind her and she would be spared having to watch the rest.

But when she looked back to the stage, she could still see through blotchy films of color. The officers attached the wrists of Cali's fiddle to the back of Dimi's neck (though by now even Stella couldn't tell the difference) and the two girls were marched, blind and stumbling, off the stage.

Stella felt Gird's hands lifting her and carrying her away from the front of the balcony. He sat her on his lap, hands exploring her exposed rump between the

dangling straps of her skirt.

“I know that was cruel, especially the message at the end.” Gird said, kneading Stella’s breast with one hand. “I’m a cruel man, and I never told you otherwise. But this way they still have a hope that it was just a trick *you* were playing.”

Stella began to come to her senses, and jumped off Gird’s lap in disgust.

“Petting isn’t in the contract!” she spat, causing Gird to laugh.

“Oh, I could tell you hadn’t signed early before! That contract was for *yesterday!* Midnight makes a new day!”

Stella would have been stunned if she could still manage any extra measure of despair at that point, but the ups and downs of the evening had made further shock an unlikely thing.

“All right, repo man. What’s your deal this time, then?” Blank resignation was all that remained in her tear-swollen eyes.

Gird stood straight and held out his card again.

“Come hard when the princess eats you out, and I’ll tell you where they’re taking the twins.”

Bail Procedures

As state-owned employees went, Chatta had a cushy job. Most unowned Torean girls her age were still working off their dowry contracts, or the ones from rich families were suffering through finishing school. Those were the girls who did what they were told, and trusted that society would reward their conformity.

But Chatta had worked out how you got ahead. She looked past the collars and chains to the invisible lines that determined masters and slaves. There were people in power who did not flaunt it the way her peers always imagined. Some enjoyed authority without attracting attention, and Chatta had a knack for finding them.

She found the girls with the maroon collars and the Alemic ensign on the gold medallions that hung from their nipples. She ate at the cafes where they dined, and followed them to the grubby karaoke booths where they took turns drinking, singing, and necking. From outside the mirrored window, passers by couldn’t tell one from another, but Chatta knew better.

She soon learned that the girl with the wide hips and black hair down to her nipples was a union tribune, and in private she began to see how the other girls treated her with a hint of the submissive respect that counted as flirting on Torei. This girl walked proud like a Mistress, and gathered the others into her arms and between her knees whenever they went out. She bought drinks and reserved booths and kept the evenings going until she was ready to go home.

Chatta knew precisely what she was doing. The day she came of age, she approached the union boss and with a coy “will you teach me?” fell between her legs, working hard to earn favor. In no time she traded the family cocklock of her youth for the maroon chastity corset of a low-level union-owned state working girl.

Chatta relished her cushy position processing incoming captures at the Ministry of Truants. She sat chained to her desk for a single work shift, with a break for lunch and fraternization. Her Union clout kept the bosses from inflicting the harsher punishments during her performance reviews, and if she played her cards right she could re-negotiate her contract next year. That could mean freeclit status three months ahead of schedule, and a dramatic pay rise.

Despite all this, Chatta was in a sour mood. The recent flood of Amalthean collars had put the pressure on everyone, and she’d just received notice from her local chapter that the negotiations had broken down and her union was going forward with a strike. Chatta had made plans, and they didn’t involve wearing a time-locked straitjacket and hood for three days, chained to the ministry fence.

“Ah well,” Chatta thought to herself, “Solidarity keeps us free!”

And so it was with this bad news on her mind that she saw Stella forcing her way past the waiting truant officers, inspecting their strings of kneeling slaves-to-be with panicked haste. She just knew that this freewomb meant for nothing but to interfere with Chatta’s work, and that it would no doubt cost her several welts on her next performance review.

“I’m sorry, Freewomb Stella, but we are simply without the necessary staff to escort you into the holding cells. Perhaps if you came back tomorrow we could—”

“There isn’t time!” Stella was red-faced with frustration and shame. “I’ve got to identify them and get their signatures before they’re shipped off! Look, here is my Hotchkiss ID and my Torean Emancipation Card. I am a freewomb in good standing, and do not need an escort within the Ministry. Don’t act like I haven’t done this before!”

Chatta sighed and brought up Stella’s entry from the Ministry of Obedience database.

“Our records show that you are currently in contract to an officer of propriety, and that you engaged in public performance for him but *ran* before completing its terms. Now, any dispute will need to be either settled between you or resolved in court, but this mark on your record prevents us from simply letting you in without either an escort or officer Gird’s approval.”

A round of cheers and wolf-whistles started up among the officers in the lobby. Stella held stiff as a board, trying not to let the loose-hanging straps of her “skirt” swing open to give them a view. Her teeth ground, but she could still see their reflection in the glassy info-wall behind Chatta’s chair.

“So it’s Gird, is it?” One of the men called out to her, “Don’t worry little clitty! I’ll protect you from him! Just come with me to temple and I’ll give you a pretty necklace that’ll keep him away!”

Stella sighed and spun on her heel. Too quickly, she worried, as she felt the straps bounce over her thighs.

“I am *not* interested in being collared, sir.” She had to be explicit, to leave no room for misinterpretation in the law. These rooms were recorded, and she couldn’t risk being seen as flirting with these slavers, or teasing them.

She turned back to Chatta, and laid the back of her hands on the desk in a pleading gesture. Once the catcalls and hooting had died down, she looked the girl in the eye and tried again.

“Listen, I’m clutching at straws, here. I need to get in and see these two girls before they’re processed. I know they mean nothing to you, and I’m no one to you, but there must be *some* way you can help me. Just...one woman to another?”

Chatta glanced over at her boss’s office door. With the crush and overtime, he wouldn’t appreciate being interrupted for some mad freewomb and her futile attempts to emancipate a couple of collars. Sighing, she brought up a form on Stella’s side of the counter, and checked availability for any of the self-service processing booths.

“All right, if you submit your case for magisterial review now, I can have you processed and fitted for bail. That bond would be enough to get you through the gates unescorted.”

Stella grimaced, cursing Gird’s name under her breath. Court review was a lot more attention than she wanted her deal to receive, but she had witnesses to his verbal acknowledgement that she could leave the bar. It was a small problem, compared to the twins’ freedom, and she needed to solve the big problems first.

“Where do I sign?”

Minutes later, Stella groaned in disgust, bending forward to lean one arm against the interior wall of the processing booth. Her other arm clutched at the spooned stomach of the “bond”, gripping uselessly at its hard smooth surface.

“Aaaaugh! Kammit, plugs! *Why the kamn plugs?!*”

“You came into this office open-cunt with a cocktease flasher skirt on.” Chatta’s voice rang from some hidden speaker, “In addition, the system reports that your last orgasm was within the past hour. You’ll have the opportunity to contest it if you go to court, but I have to file you as a level two slut. The bail belt simply configured itself to the appropriate settings for your recent behavior.”

Stella punched the wall, clawing at the metallic corset and chastity belt combination that now squeezed her breathless and impaled her twice. It was her fulfillment of the terms of her contract with Gird that had made this bail belt

so severe. She'd always known at an intellectual level how twisted the Torean justice system could be, but now it was literally fucking her in the ass.

"If you like," Chatta continued smugly, "I can cancel the application. The bond would unlock, and you'd head home and deal with the contract as you see fit."

Stella pried at the edges of the metal swimsuit, trying to slip fingers underneath the seams at her hips, crotch, and the diagonal neckline that squashed her modest breasts up into a distinct cleavage. The inability to feel her own body beneath it gave her a bit of a panic, but it was the mark on her record that filled her with dread. If the court review came down against her, the punishments available for a level two slut were far more distasteful than a chastity suit with a couple of orifice-holders.

Of course all this was nothing compared to the utter lack of status that Cali and Dimi were faced with. Stella closed her eyes, bit her lip, and exhaled.

"I'll need new clothes." Stella's voice was soft and forceless, as though she had not breathed enough to actually speak the words. "This thing is cinched so tight I'll need to use a wardrobe."

Chatta led her back through the lobby full of whooping and cheering truant officers with their terrified catches.

"That's a lot more metal than a little collar, isn't it!"

"Hey there clit, if you're at a party remember that we have keys for that thing!"

"Still room for you in my catch!"

Stella's face burned from the humiliation of being marched past these pigs with nothing but a steel swimsuit on, but as ever she focused on the job she had to do. She'd walk in freedom with Dimi and Cali, and that would be the best defeat for all of the disgusting little men that thought themselves above her.

She stepped out of the staff wardrobe booth with an acceptable compromise. She wore a black leather business suit with matching pencil skirt and bolero jacket. She couldn't get the neckline of the satiny white blouse to cover her over-presented cleavage, but she'd managed to convince the machine to give her a brooch that pinned the collar together adequately.

The seamed silk stockings were a bit more pleasure than business, but the tops were covered by the skirt so long as she didn't bend too much. It was the patent platforms with the towering fuck-me heels that she'd spent the most time trying to reconfigure without success. Even the makeup had eventually gone successfully down from "expensive whore" to merely "dramatic doll-up".

"Your wardrobe needs a technician." Stella grumbled to Chatta as she returned to the desk, tenderly feeling the set of the tight bun her hair now formed. "It wouldn't give me what I asked for."

Chatta's confused look melted into a smirk, and her words threatened to burst into giggles as they left her mouth.

"You're a second-level slut on bail." she laughed, "It doesn't *have to*."

Stella squirmed on the hard stool, staring at her reflection in the mirror for lack of anything better to pass the time. She'd used the toilet quickly before heading to this appointment, and the experience had left her on edge. She'd always been a *little* curious about the bidet attachment that Sophie's maid always used to clean out her belt, but only as a grotesque curiosity. Now she had no choice.

She'd emptied her bladder, and was relieved when it all drained without discomfort, but the washing cycle included an enema and douche that left her with a distracting tingling feeling all over between her legs. Stella crossed her knees, watching the image in the mirror do the same, and tried to think about something else.

It didn't work: a quick peek of garter beneath the tight silken pencil-skirt had her humming a little louder inside. If she'd seen a girl looking like this down the bar, she'd have taken her home and squeezed her dry like a sponge. Level two slut, eh? They made for a fun night out, once in a while.

When the visiting booth's mirror switched transparent, and Stella saw the twins on the other side, it was as if half of the evening's fear and tension just sighed itself right out of her mouth. The girls were still in their catsuits and fiddles, but the hoods were off.

They had clearly been crying, and the sight of Stella made them press against the glass in a way that was painfully familiar. Stella had met with women hauled in on truancy charges before, and almost without exception they were panicked and desperate to get out. They'd scabble for any opportunity to fix their circumstances, which was often how the ministry trapped them forever.

"Dimi, Cali, listen. I know this is horrible, but I absolutely *need* to know something before we can talk. Can you pay attention and answer me truthfully?" Stella paused, ensuring that they were listening. "Have you agreed to anything or promised anything to anyone since you got here?"

"How could we?" Cali said, swallowing hard, "We were blind and gagged until just a minute ago. Stel, please, what the cock is going on? Why are we in here?"

Stella took a deep breath, and held her hands with the palms down in a gesture of sincerity.

"All right, that's some relief, at least. The reason you're here is that Amalthea just lost membership in the last treaty that ensured the freedom of its citizens on Torei. Soph suspected it was pre-arranged as a political takeover, and the readiness of the truant officers kind of supports that. So for now, any Amalthean woman over the age of independence who doesn't already have a collar or a contract is suddenly considered illegally at large."

“But *you’re* Amalthean. Why aren’t you in here?”

“*Half* Amalthean, remember?” Stella looked at Dimi directly, “My father was Hotchee, and I still go back to tidy his grave every year. I’m well protected by the confederation, right now.”

“That’s great for you,” Cali snapped, “but what do we do?”

“Right, that’s where Sophie’s plan comes in.” Stella moved some documents to the glass window between them, so that the twins could read them. “She’s currently negotiating a new treaty of some sort with Relitania. It’s all behind closed doors, but all we need to do is stall your processing until it is signed. Once that’s done, it’ll be trivial to file an application for re-emancipation and you’ll be on the streets again.”

The girls looked at the forms on the window, and did their best to sign them with their hands cuffed to the fiddles around their throats. It was just in time, too, as the 30 second timer began to flash on the window between them.

“Just remember: whatever happens in there, you’re two free women who are unjustly imprisoned. You’ll be released as soon as the paperwork is cleared up. Do not promise anything to anyone, and you’re best off not speaking at all. I’ll see you in a couple of days to get you out!”

Stella saw two men grab the twins and drag hoods back over their heads, and then suddenly she was looking at the slutty office girl in the mirror again. It didn’t pay to despair at times like this, in her business. You had to trust that you had cracked the code, and that the pieces would play as you predicted.

But the other side always had a few surprises of their own.

Stella felt exhausted as she waited on the platform for the train. She had won some, lost some, and just needed to take a good long heat soak and try to get some sleep before the courts opened. As she stood, flexed her feet in the ridiculous heels the wardrobe had given her. She kept trying to stretch her heels out of them a bit, but the ridiculous ankle straps kept her suffering feet clamped inside the things. The best she could do was rock back on the stiletto point to work her ankles some for relief.

When the train arrived, she stepped forward eagerly, spotting a free seat on the relatively empty after-hours service. Her feeling of success was short-lived, however, as the moment she reached the door she received a sudden crack against her backside. It felt for all the world like someone had slapped her with a crop or snapped a rubber band at her bottom.

Stella whirled around, glaring daggers at the man she expected to see behind her. But she was now alone on the platform, everyone having already boarded the train. Confused, she turned back to the train and tried to step on, only to feel what she now realized was a stronger shock coming from the plug in her anus.

Screaming in disbelief and frustration, she watched the doors close and the train pull out of the station. Once it had gone, she turned and quietly walked out of the station, confused. It was only when she saw the truant officer waiting for her at the exit gate that she understood what had just happened.

“I’m led to understand that there was an attempted bail violation, just now? Were you trying to leave Alem while bound to its jurisdiction?”

“Oh kann! Er, no officer, sorry, it was absent-mindedness on my part. I guess I forgot about the borders and just started going home on auto-pilot. It was a mistake, sir, and I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Going home? Then you do not domicile in Alem?” The officer perked up suddenly and grabbed her wrist, but Stella was too exhausted to realize what he was after, at first.

“Hey! What? No, I live in Mokta.”

“Clit if you do not have a place of residence you can reach before curfew, then I will have to collar you on a charge of vagrancy right now.”

Stella’s drowsy head jolted into action. A vag rap wasn’t as dangerous as curfew violation, but in her current situation it could start the kind of downward spiral that she needed to avoid.

“Ah, no officer. There’s an apartment here in Alem I can stay at. Here, look, I have the key.”

The man insisted on escorting her to the front door, and watching her try the key. He even barged into the place to give it a cursory once over, which was something Stella had never seen before. Of course, Stella had never had her status sink so low before.

Once the man had faced his disappointment and left, Stella tore off her clothes and collapsed on Sophie’s bed. She felt no time pass before she awoke suddenly to the sensation of a presence in the room. She bent to sit upright, only to tense against the unyielding metal of the chastity corset and fall off the bed.

Crawling back up, she saw the maid sitting primly on the corner of the mattress, her legs crossed. Above her glossy scold’s mask, her eyes glittered with a knowing smile. The look on her face made Stella’s face burn.

“Don’t you dare even think it, *slave*.” Stella mumbled, rising to her feet. “I’m a *free wo-*”

The time display on the wall rolled over to a new early-morning hour, and Stella was suddenly startled by the sensations of warmth and vibration between her legs. It caught her completely by surprise, and she sat back down suddenly on the bed. Her nipples felt like soft brushes were tracing lazy circles around them, and she felt the plug in her vagina squirming slowly like an exploring tongue.

When she caught her breath, she realized that the maid was squirming as well, rubbing her thighs together with rubbery squeaks as she shifted her knees around. Soon the girl rolled to a crawl behind Stella and began rubbing her shoulders.

Stella was so in need of the massage that she allowed herself to be lowered back down on the bed while the maid crawled on top of her. The two women moaned, one into her gag, as each relished the teasing stimulation from her chastity belt. Stella scissored her legs with the maid's and they ground their buzzing crotches together while Stella licked and nibbled the slavegirl's ears and cheeks.

Stella felt a wave approaching, the kind that usually let her begin to build up for a grand orgasm. She gasped at the thought of the sensations to come, and as if summoned by her need the stimulations faded away to silence.

"What? Graaagh! Kammit, no!" She threw the maid from her and clawed at the seams of her bail belt. She hammered on the crotch with her fist, trying desperately to make it shake within her, but it was well built for its purpose.

The maid, flushed, had regained her composure and resumed the condescending leer that had woken Stella up in the first place. When Stella glared at her, the maid did an enthusiastic pantomime: she pointed at Stella, then at herself. She pretended to rub her crotch vigorously, and then brought her fists together behind her back and shook her head in mock distress. Finally she clapped her hands like an excited little girl and bounced on the bed.

"God, how do you stand this?" Stella had given up trying to assert her status over the girl. For her part, the maid simply pointed out the door at the closet where the old hypersonic washer still sat. Stella rolled her eyes. Sophie's old-fashioned insistence on keeping clothes around must have been one reason the maid was nearly impossible to discipline.

"It doesn't matter." Stella barked as she tried to ignore the frustration of denial. "I've got work to do today. The twins were taken in last night."

The maid made another expression of surprise and joy, pointing at Sophie's photos of Dimi and Cali when they were younger, and then at her own collar. She made a clearly inquisitive facial expression, and then lifted one knee and pantomimed the crack of a whip before clapping with little-girl joy again.

"Yeah I know they aren't your favorite mistresses, but don't get any ideas. I've got to get down to the bailey to represent them in court today. When they come home, maybe I'll tell them how interested you were in playing cowgirl with them."

The maid draped her hands loosely over her crossed knees and tilted her head down, fluttering her thick black eyelashes at Stella. Stella rolled her eyes, but stopped short when the maid jumped suddenly to her feet, petticoats bouncing. Stella followed her gaze out the bedroom door, finding herself just as startled.

"Soph!"

“Good morning Stel. I see you’ve...had some difficulties.” Stella stood at the doorway, a vision in glossy white and gleaming chrome. “I’m afraid I have some bad news.”

Stella felt at the smooth metal shell of her corset’s spooned stomach, stammering for words. Sophie continued on without waiting for a reply.

“I don’t know how it got authorized, but a large number of the recent Amalthean truants have been fast-tracked to the Ministry of Improvements. The twins were relocated to a treatment facility there just a couple hours ago. The work order is sealed, so we don’t know yet what modifications are planned for them, but we need to work *fast* if we’re to get them back intact.”

“Oh kammit *no!*” Stella wailed, banging her fist against her metal chest, “But then, you... I mean, why are you...?”

“Why am I wearing a collar?” Sophie’s gaze fell downward. “Because...according to our nation’s agreement with Relitania, I am now a slave.”

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 blinders. 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, kamn!"

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 kamn 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 free-wombs 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.