**Zoe**

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After breakfast, I took a long shower.

Afterwards, my heart already beating, I sat down at my dressing table. Looking at my image in the mirror, I wasn't sure if I should be pleased, disturbed, amused or what. I knew that in any case I was pretty excited about the day. My inner Zoe was turning cartwheels in her excitement.

When it comes to makeup, I generally go with the less-is-more philosophy. Today, I definitely wanted better than that. I took my time; there was no hard-and-fast timetable. I wanted 'seductive but not slutty', 'daring but possibly submissive'. It took me a couple of tries but I think I got it.

Finished, I moved on to my hair.

I'd been to my stylist the night before. I'd pressed her to cut it short, far shorter than I was used to. She had asked me if I was sure and I'd grinned at her, invented a cute bloke I wanted to impress and told her to go for short, sexy and sassy. She had hit the nail right on the head.

A kind of a raggedy bob with an uneven fringe gave me a lot of flexibility and yet, to my eyes, looked really sophisticated, really hot. It took my creamy blonde hair and, seen in the salon mirror for the first time yesterday, made both it and me look amazing.

It was also easy to recreate and maintain; a few minutes with brush and comb brought it right back. I licked my lips, smiled at my new image. Mirror Zoe smiled back. I thought she looked pretty good!

Turning away from the mirror, I picked up an unmarked bag from a shopping trip earlier in the week. According to the net, 'Kay's' was the leading sex shop in Melbourne, their stock sophisticated rather than skanky.

The rope in my hands was soft nylon, 5mm thick. I thought its scarlet colour looked remarkably good against my skin.

There had also been silk cord for sale at the store - darker, almost wine-red in colour and so soft it felt like it would fall through flesh without pressure, leaving behind no mark and no damage. Sadly, my purse had begun to shudder and moan every time my fingers even went near it. And, although natural fibre was more traditional, I wanted something softer, at least to start. Nylon it would be.

For years, almost since I had entered puberty, the thought of what I was about to do today had been at the forefront of my fantasies. I'd read every book, every article I could find on bondage and exhibitionism. There weren't many, of course, at least not at first. The local library was hopeless and my parents kept the internet pretty-well locked down for their kids. Even when they bought me my first smartphone, parental controls were welded in place.

Things improved overnight when I got my first job and could afford an unlimited phone of my own. And it my 'over-nights' became much, much more fun, let me tell you. A new world had opened for me.

So I'd been 'getting ready' for a long time. I guess you could say I was like somebody who's dreamed their whole life about Scuba diving and who's bought all the gear and who's spent hours polishing it and touching it and reading about diving and had a shelf of books - but had never actually gone diving.

Yeah, that's me.

But today was - if I could keep my nerve - The Day.

The shibari pattern I'd settled on was a simple tortoiseshell. I picked up the rope and folded it in half. Near the top end, I tied a series of simple overhand knots the length of my hand apart. The loop created by the first knot was large enough to slide over my head; once that was done and the rope allowed to fall down my front, the remaining knots were spaced evenly down my chest and stomach.

I passed the two free ends between my legs and up my back before threading it through the loop at the nape of my neck. Passing a length down and under each arm, I brought the ends through the second loop in front of me, between the first and second knots. Then back to the ropes over my spine, the forward again. And back. And forth.

Eventually, the ends of the line were tied off after several ties around my upper thighs, much like old-fashioned garters. Looking at the mirror, I was struck by the bold pattern of diamonds overlying my torso. Although a large knot was commonly positioned over the subject's clitoris, I had other plans for today. Reaching down, I shifted the two cords to rest outside my labia.

Looking at my image, I shifted my breasts so that they protruded more fully between the cords. My nipples were already hard and I caressed them gently. Already I felt a welcome tautness in my groin, a promise of... what?

I wasn't entirely sure, but was eager to explore.

Standing back before the mirror, I turned this way and that, admiring the effect, running my hands gently over my bewebbed body, gently pinching my nipples.

I twisted my hips and felt the ropes around my body twist and shift, an improvised but most elegant sleeveless straightjacket, constraining not movement, but what - modesty? mood? Here and there, my skin was gently caught between adjoining cords. It was an incredibly erotic feeling. I felt my nipples harden still more and, for the first time, a wetness between my legs.

I went over to my jewellery box and took out a treasured keepsake, a short necklace once owned by my grandmother and given to me by my mother when Gran died. At the time, its design had meant nothing to me; the chain of sterling fingernail-size triskelions had been nothing more than artistic spirals - a Celtic design, perhaps?

It wasn't until much later that I'd read of the symbol's link to, shall we say, an alternate culture. By then, Gran and Popsy were long beyond my ability to ask.

Gran? Could it be...?

I doubt I'll ever know. One thing is certain, though - I won't be asking Mummy Dearest.

I settled it around my neck, fastened the clasp. The polished silver stood out nicely against my tan. I hadn't initially known what the triskelion design represented, but out on the streets, who knows who might see it? It could be my entrée into another new world.

I tingled at the potential.

Reaching again into the shop bag, I pulled out a tiny box with another treasure, this one definitely new. I removed two flat clips of sterling-silver wire, much the same as paper-clips. Lacking the second loop, they nonetheless clipped firmly on my nipples, stimulating them and keeping them stiff. At the same time, they laid quite flat against my boobs, meaning I could wear a thin dress braless and not have them visible.

I skipped knickers and bra. That was the whole point of the exercise.

It should have been a miniskirt, right? I had one ready, but on putting it on, the thigh ropes were well below the hem. I thought of changing the rope pattern, but I'd put too much trouble into it, felt too committed to it. It was elegant in its beauty and made me feel the same. No, I would have to skip the miniskirt.

I settled for a red knee-length red circular skirt. It was a bit formal, but would work for dressy casual. A plain white leather belt emphasized the narrowness of my waist.

I hesitated while choosing a top. If I'd had more confidence, I'd have gone with a plain white blouse, something thin enough to show my braless state to better advantage. I decided that would have to wait until I had a bit more confidence and settled for a short-sleeved, form-fitted black blouse with a red polka dot pattern. Add to them a pair of black (OK, super dark blue) ankle-strap heels and I figured I had a winning combination.

I had one last thing to do.

It could have been vibrating panties. It could have been a small bullet. It could've been an old-fashioned egg. Instead, I reached into a drawer for the final purchase, a 'new-fashioned' vibrator, rather like an egg but far more sophisticated. It had no less than 12 settings and its batteries would run for over two hours. A small extension or finger would rest on top of my clitoris when the thing was fully inserted.

I thought it would suit my purpose nicely today. I'd already washed it carefully and ensured it had a full charge. I set it for a random vibration pattern.

Inserting it was no problem. Although I never been with a boy I'd cared enough about to actually have sex, I'd lost my hymen so long ago as a little girl that I couldn't even remember it. Yeah, go figure, all this sexy trouble and still untapped...

Anyway, the instructions suggested lube, but I was already so wet that it proved unnecessary. I had to rest one leg on a step for the right angle; it slid in with not much effort at all. I felt full - happily so. Looking in the mirror, it was essentially out of sight, with my lips hiding the clit extension and just a ring-size loop of string exposed.

The plan was simple enough, I thought - hop on the first tram which came along, take it at least 15 blocks and then walk home. On the way, I had set myself two tasks. The first was to stop and order a coffee -- sitting down for it so not to permit myself the luxury of takeout. I also had mentally highlighted my resolve to flirt with the waiter there. When I was done my coffee, I would stop in a shop and buy something mildly embarrassing - condoms, maybe?

And I would not permit myself an orgasm until I reached home again.

So simple, right?

I looked at myself in the entryway mirror and took a deep sigh. Showtime, girl!

As I looked, I could feel the first arousing tingle deep within my ladybits.

I again looked at Mirror Zoe for reassurance and watched her grin nervously at me. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and stepped outside into the warm sunshine.

Locking the door behind me, I turned and headed down the steps, dropping the key into my bag as I went. I don't normally wear heels and wobbled just a little before riding-a-bicycle ability kicked in. Feeling surer of myself, I strode off down the footpath towards the tram stop.

I was pleasantly aware of the girth and solid weight of the vibrator within me as I walked. The vibrations were increasing as I went, but I figured it was nothing I couldn't handle.

Or, at least, nothing I couldn't handle initially. I was aware of a gradual increase in sensations. How not? But as exciting, as stimulating as it all was, I figured willpower - and the ever-present threat of public discovery and humiliation if that willpower failed me - would see me through.

I passed the usual neighbourhood shops. A couple of shopkeepers I knew waved at me. I'd grown to like the openness and friendliness of the people here since arriving in Oz six months ago from the other side of the world. I waved back. Maybe I'd stop in on my return, if I were still sane.

Soon I was at the tram stop. I closed my eyes, tried to focus inwardly on this particular moment of this particular day and on the sensations. I was torn between that and constantly checking to see if somebody had noticed, if there were looks of disapproval - or of interest.

There weren't - so far. To my surprise, I was both relieved and disappointed.

Standing there, I found it difficult to believe I was finally doing this, had finally dared. It'd been a fantasy of mine for as long as I could remember.

Fortunately, it wasn't long before the tram arrived. I boarded and sat down - no backing out now. There were a couple of good-looking young boys nearby, but they were lost in talking footy and scarcely noticed me. I wasn't sure if I was irritated or relieved.

I settled in for the ride.

I had of course been on Collins Street since I had arrived in Melbourne, but who could ever know it all in that time? It was fun just watching. I eventually hopped off and started walking back. I figured it'd be at least a half-hour before getting home.

There are a host of coffee shops and cafés in the area. I'd been in some, but, walking along, I waited until I found one I didn't know. It looked new, trendy and I decided to make my stop there.

Sadly, it was a waitress who greeted me, not a waiter, and while my dare-list didn't exactly ban flirting with another woman, I was already pushing my boundaries. I chose a spot in the warm sun by the window and ordered a cappuccino. The vibrator was revving up and down and I was more than a little aroused.

The place was anything but busy, but the coffee was excellent and I guessed business would pick up closer to noon. I forced myself to just sip the cappuccino; I wanted this to last.

I sat, trying to be aware of and yet not concentrate on rope and vibrator. Histoire d'O had the women of Roissy prohibited from crossing their legs in public. Would that apply in this case? Well, I'd never been to France, much less Roissy and I knew nobody named René. I crossed my legs.

And immediately uncrossed them. Crossing them had intensified the feeling from the vibrator, almost pushing me over the edge into orgasm.

I knew I would have to be careful if this whole plan wasn't to unravel in public. Well, of course not in public - that was the whole point, wasn't it? I squirmed in pleasurable discomfort.

"I like your necklace," came a voice from a nearby table.

Startled, I turned to see a slender man sitting nearby with another woman. In his 40s, his black hair was speckled with grey at the temples; grey also showed in a well-trimmed narrow beard. His grey eyes seemed to twinkle in amusement.

He wore white daks, a light grey jacket, white dress shirt and a pink tie. There was a small carnation on his lapel. On some people, it might have been silly; on him it looked amazing.

The woman with him was younger but still older than me, maybe in her early 30s. Straight, raven-black hair came down almost to her waist. Her figure was stellar. She had high cheekbones and a perfect chin. She was dressed in an elegant white linen frock; her eyes were hidden behind large round sunnies. Her only jewellery was a heavy-linked gold chain necklace. Beneath their table, endlessly long, shapely legs led down to white high heels which I realized to my shock just had to be Louboutins.

They were a stunning couple. Sitting there, despite all the care I'd taken, I felt quite ordinary, almost drab.

"Thank you," I stammered, unnerved at the steady gazes of the two of them.

"It looks quite old," he said.

"It was my grandmother's. I'm not sure where she got it."

"Ah, a family treasure! Such things are indeed worth keeping. But the symbol is a deep one, for those interested in such. Do you follow symbolism or are you wear it purely for its beauty and family connection?"

I gasped as the little vibe deep within me surged suddenly. One of his eyebrows went up, but he said nothing. His companion sat looking at me impassively.

In a moment, the sensation decreased a little and I was able to respond.

"Well, I wear it in memory of Gran and it is really pretty..."

I paused. At the pause, the girl smiled slightly, briefly, almost as if in compassion.

"It is indeed," he said approvingly. "What of the symbol?"

I had to wiggle in my chair as the vibrator abruptly got stronger. It was becoming harder and harder to focus. Inner Zoe giggled at my predicament.

Pulling myself back from the brink, I said cautiously, "It was originally Celtic and stood for balance - mind, body and spirit, or mother, father and child, but always balance. What it meant to Gran, I am not sure."

He smiled at me. "So true. But you look warm there in the sun. Would you care to join us here in the shade?"

I was indeed hot, but it wasn't entirely due to the sun. I realized that I was very close to cumming. Holding off that onrushing orgasm was taking a lot of concentration and mental effort. I could feel perspiration on my forehead. I sagged as another wave of pre-orgasmic tremors took me.

The man looked briefly at the woman, then rose, walked to my table and held out his hand in invitation. "Come!"

Drained of almost all will but that needed to hang on, I took his hand and followed him to sit in the shade, facing away from the street and entrance.

"Pardon my manners," he smiled. "My name is Gideon. May I ask yours?"

"Zoe," I replied softly. The devilish machine had slowed down.

A little.

"Zoe, this is Claire," he said, introducing me to his companion. "Sadly, Claire has business elsewhere and cannot stay." It was not so much an explanation as a dismissal. The girl gave a small moue, but rose on cue and kissed his cheek. She extended her hand to me. I took it and found her grip was surprisingly strong.

"It has been a pleasure to meet you, Zoe. I do hope to see you again." She smiled again, this time with more sincerity. I noticed a slight accent, but couldn't place it. "It is indeed a lovely necklace. I hope you benefit from it." With that curious remark, she bent and kissed my cheek, then dropped her hand and left. Her poise and gait were as polished as any high-fashion model. Her bottom inside the skirt was exquisite.

I realized that, were I ever to meet her again, I would have either found a best friend or a terrible enemy.

Gideon cleared his throat. Looking past me and raising his hand high over his head, he waved his index finger down at us, back and forth.

Puzzled, I looked over my shoulder to see the barista nod at us before starting two fresh cappuccinos.

"Over here, Zoe," Gideon said from behind me. "We were talking and you are far prettier than she."

Flustered, I turned back. Gideon had leaned back in his chair, facing me. There was a grin of sardonic amusement on his face.

"So, Zoe," he said levelly, "Tell me about yourself."

I gulped inwardly. Deep inside, I realized that this wasn't what I'd planned and that this wasn't merely a good-looking man standing for a coffee. 'Flirt with waiter' had been left miles back in the ditch. This was something far more serious. That realization hit me at the same time as the damned vibe took off again.

I gasped, my hands clutched the arms of my chair.

I think my eyes crossed.

I would not - could not - have an orgasm in front of this man, a total stranger, not in public. That wasn't how the day-dreams ended.

The vibe slowed down, almost to nothing. I remained poised just short of the edge, simmering with frustration.

"Zoe," his deep voice repeated. Soft as it was, it was commanding in its presence, almost compelling.

I opened my eyes again, stared at him, tried to smile back.

I'd never felt so exposed before, so... overawed. But I realized that I liked it.

"Be honest now, Zoe. Be honest with both of us. You know what that symbol means, don't you?"

I bit my lip, lowered my eyes. "Yes," I said softly.

"What does it mean to you, Zoe, in the context of here and now?"

"BDSM," I whispered, barely audibly.

"Yes. And -- fair dinkum now - is that why you are wearing it?"

His pale eyes bored into mine, not turning away as two cappuccinos were delivered.

Once the server had left, I worked up the courage to answer his question. "Yes."

"And from that admission, I can tell you two things about Zoe," he said in a soft voice.

I looked at him and squirmed as another round of not-quite-orgasm hit me.

Without waiting for more of a response, he continued.

"You, lovely Zoe, are somebody who wants to be a sub, but doesn't know how. Am I correct?"

To my horror, I felt a full-body blush like a sunrise. How not to look sophisticated! In spite of myself, I nodded shyly.

"And this was your first try at it, yes?"

I nodded again, humbly. Short of just telling him to rack off, I saw no other choice.

"Good. And the second thing I can tell about you is a bit different. That outfit you have on is a perfect tenner. But Claire -- such an eye she has! - noticed some subtle bumps and shadows which suggest that you are wearing something... unusual under it? Am I right in that, Zoe?"

I closed my eyes, opened them before nodding again, slowly, hesitatingly.

His smile faded, but his overall expression remained friendly, supportive. I felt that I could fall into his eyes, they were that enthralling.

"Show it to me." It was less than a directive, more than a request.

Despite the entire idea of my expedition, despite necklace, despite shibari and despite vibrator - despite it all - I was shocked at his expectation.

I shook my head. "No."

"No? Then tell me, Zoe, why did you put on a bondage harness under your kit before you went for a walk this fine morning, if not to risk getting discovered? Or do you belong to another?"

My eyes were locked onto my knees.

"Look at me, Zoe."

Two ages and an eternity later, I raised my eyes to his.

We were sitting in the open in an upscale café. I knew I could simply get up and walk away. I knew that, but as riveted as a bird by an approaching snake, I simply could not make myself move from where I sat.

My heart pounded, and it wasn't just the damned vibrator inside me. My soul seemed to rise at the chance I knew could be mine.

"We can do this two ways, Zoe. The first is for you to do what you and I both know you want to do, which is to lift the hem of your skirt where you are sitting and show me what you are wearing. That will leave us as friends and give us both an opportunity for the future. Or - or - you can say No again, in which case we will just finish our cappuccinos and go our separate ways with no hard feelings.

"It's not every day I get to spend an hour with such a pretty young woman. I've enjoyed your company and do hope you've enjoyed our time together as well. But now it's up to you. Which is it to be?"

My heart was hammering. I was terrified, yet I also felt I was in the brink of... what?

Fulfilment?

Destiny?

Or something else, something much, much darker?

I moaned as the bloody vibe chose that moment to go into overdrive again.

I had endless choices; I had no choice whatever. Not letting my eyes slip away from his, I reached down and slowly lifted my skirt, holding the hem up against my chest. The vibrator slowed down as I did so.

"Spread your legs a bit, Zoe. Ah, that's better! Very pretty indeed. Did somebody do that for you or did you do it yourself?"

I found myself unable to respond. I let the skirt fall.

After a moment, he reached across and stroked my cheekbone with a gentle finger, smiled.

"You did it yourself, didn't you?"

I didn't know whether to be proud or ashamed. Still silent, I nodded meekly.

"Its beautiful, Zoe, artistic and very sexy. What I could see of it, that is. How far up does it go? Or did you just limit it to your bum and thighs?"

"It's a full tortoiseshell, all the way up."

"What a beaut! You're very talented, Zoe, for an amateur. You are a beginner, aren't you?"

I didn't know what to say.

"Is there somebody else with a claim on you?"

I shook my head. There certainly wasn't, although too many nights had been filled with dreams of one - a strong, demanding, patient, kind, knowledgeable, assertive man. Only my dreams had never shown me his face.

He smiled, laid his hand on the table, palm upwards in invitation. "I would very much like to see the rest of it, Zoe."

The rest of it - that would mean...

I was so desperately torn. I so wanted this man's approval. My body ached for his touch, the touch of a man I'd not known for an hour.

I wanted to be sure.

I wanted to be pushed.

I wanted to be led.

I wanted tomorrow to be safe.

I wanted today to be... what?

Not normal, that was for sure. Anything but normal.

The indecision must have shown on my face, for Gideon spoke again.

"Zoe," he said softly, sipping the last of his cappuccino and dropping a bill on the table to cover the cost of our coffees, "it has been a sweet morning and perhaps we will see one another again. I am going to leave now. I am going to my flat, three minutes' walk from here. I hope you come with me, for I do wish to see the rest of that pattern. The choice is yours."

With that he rose to his feet. Passing me, he leaned down and kissed the top of my head in passing, like a mother kissing a small child on its way out to play. He leaned down and whispered in my ear, "Dare to follow your dreams, Zoe. She'll be right."

With that, he strode out of the cafe and out the door. He didn't look back.

I sat there, torn in so many different ways.

He'd said we might see each again. I wanted that. I thought I wanted it.

And he seemed to understand and I had so desperately sought that kind of understanding ever since I became a woman.

And he seemed nice. Certainly handsome and well-groomed, well-dressed. His wristwatch would have cost my rent for a quarter.

And Claire looked terrific.

But I was terrified of what he might be. Worse - I was terrified of what I might turn out to be.

And good girls didn't want to seem forward. Oh hell, who was I kidding about 'good girls'? Good girls didn't -- as I found myself doing as I heard the door close -- have to bite off a squeal as a momentary pulse from a vibrator drove them close to insanity in public.

I sat there in complete frazzle for perhaps 20 seconds. Deciding, I lurched to my feet and, as quickly as I could on unpractised heels, ran after him. The sound of my heels seemed to echo thunder in the room around me.

Bursting out the door, I saw him turn a corner just ahead. Rounding it myself, I saw him about to enter a doorway like any other.

"Gideon!" I cried.

He turned at the sound of my voice. A heartwarming smile crossed his face. My heart gave a double beat at its warmth. And the damned vibe shot up again, reminding me of how this day had been intended. I barely managed to control the wobble in my gait.

"Zoe! I am so glad you changed your mind!" He held the door open for me and gave a small bow as he waved me through.

His flat was on the first floor, up a flight of real marble stairs. The building was like a dowager determined to maintain her looks at any cost. Clean and well-maintained, it could only be described as 'stately'.

His key went into the lock without so much as a sound, held in fingers concert pianists would kill for.

He paused before opening the door. "Are you sure, Zoe?"

"No," I said. "I mean Yes. I mean, I think so. But No, I don't know what I'm doing."

His smile was comforting, endlessly warm and gentle. His hand softly traced my jawbone and I felt as safe as I had felt daring an hour before.

"That's OK. I do."

With that, he pushed open the door.

His flat was surprising. I wasn't sure what I had expected, but it hadn't been this. It seemed immaculately clean and tidy, as if being readied for a pre-sale viewing. Skylights made it bright and warm, as if one was actually outside. Gauzy curtains blocked a view of what was obviously a balcony outside.

The predominant colour was a light cream set off with large highlights of warm medium brown. A modest but serviceable kitchen was located unobtrusively in one corner; an overhead ring of iron hooks above a small butcher-block island was festooned with shiny copper pots and pans. The centre of the room was open and brilliantly lit by the sun; the floor was covered with an elaborate rug in cream, orange and dull red.

The walls held perhaps a dozen framed black-and-white sketches or drawings, all obviously by the same artist. While most were perhaps 12" by 18" in size, some were smaller, one no bigger than a postcard. All were done in a bold, simple fashion.

The people in them were... odd. All of them were distorted to some degree or another, some to the point of being grotesque - men with erections as large as themselves, women with ornate hair farting in the direction of a sour-looking naked dwarf, naked women at their toilette or surrounded in ecstatic dance by swirling hair and fabric.

Deformed as they were and despite the simplicity with which they were drawn, the figures were immensely vibrant, alive. I felt myself being drawn by the intensity the artist had so purely portrayed.

I was impressed with Gideon's taste. I went from one to another, turned back to see him watching me approvingly. One eyebrow went up in question.

"They're amazing!" I said excitedly. "Who...?"

"Aubrey Beardsley," he said. "19th century. Glad you like them." He smiled again, then, "Would you like something to drink?"

I shook my head, bubbling with unstated questions, then fell silent as I remembered why we had come here. The vibrator had backed off; I could feel just the barest tingle between my legs.

"No?" Gideon asked. "Well then, why don't you put your handbag down and then come over here into the light?"

I moved towards the rug, stopped and bent over to remove my heels.

"Leave them on, Zoe."

This time, it was a command; I left them on.

He looked at me standing there, my hands by my sides. Then he spoke, his voice low. "Well?"

That one word sent shivers all over me. I really had no idea. This whole scheme looked really, really crazy to me now. My adolescent fantasy about walking around in public had somehow morphed into me about to take off my clothes in front of a total stranger in his flat, a man I'd only known for an hour. What was I thinking?

Inner Zoe was laughing hysterically. What had I been thinking about if not exactly and precisely this?

I gulped, closed my eyes and, crossing my arms in front of me, reached down for my hem. In one smooth motion, I pulled it up over my hips, then my shoulders and over my head. Pulling my arms out of my sleeves, I dropped it on the floor by my feet and stood upright for his inspection.

To my surprise, he said not a word about my body, the shibari - none of it.

"Pick it up," he said, pointing at my dress. "Never be sloppy, Zoe. Pick it up, fold it neatly and put it by your handbag." Again, it was not a request.

Wordlessly, I did so, returning to the centre of the rug. I could feel the warmth of the sun on my shoulders.

"That's better, Zoe. Now you need to present yourself properly. Stand up very straight and put your hands behind your head. Spread your feet apart. Wider - shoulder width. Good. Now arch your back to push your chest out. Excellent."

I was both exhilarated and embarrassed at the complete exposure the position left me in. No know what else to do, I kept my eyes on the floor.

"Some doms, Zoe, want their subs' eyes downcast at all times. Right now, I don't want that. I want to be able to watch your expression, see your soul through your eyes. I want you to look up and forward, Zoe, all the time until I tell you differently."

I raised my eyes, looked him in the face. His expression was at once stern yet encouraging, patient yet demanding. Above all, I saw openness, kindness. He smiled and again his finger traced my cheekbone. I felt helpless yet so incredibly powerful. I felt the air moving over my body in a way I had never felt it before. I found it exhilarating, liberating.

Oh, and intensely erotic.

"Stand still while I examine this most artistic marvel, Zoe. Do you mind if I touch you?"

It was a curious mix of command and almost humble request. I was perplexed, but nodded.

"Thank you."

Gideon walked around me on the rug. I could feel his grey eyes moving over every part of my body. From time to time, a slim finger would trace a section of cord, stroke the skin beneath or beside it.

"Am I to understand that this is your first time wearing such a..." he paused very briefly, "... creation, Zoe?"

"Yes."

"And nobody helped you?"

"No."

I felt his cool, strong hands sweeping over the skin of my bum, up my waist and settling on my shoulder. I'd thought I couldn't be any more turned on, but I was very wrong. And it was a different type of arousal entirely. The vibrator had left me wanting to cum; Gideon's gentle caresses left me yearning - desperately needing - to be possessed.

"You made only one small mistake in symmetry, Zoe. One loop went over back here when it should have gone under. Especially given your inexperience, it's brilliant."

He removed his hands from my shoulder, gave me a gentle kiss behind one ear. I thought I would melt right there.

Gideon resumed his inspection. Finally, he had returned to a position immediately in front of me. Reaching up, he cupped my breasts, his fingers sweeping under the ropes at their base.

"And these clips are so clever,' he smiled. "And so perfect for such perfect breasts."

For some reason, I was almost disappointed at his respectful tone. Deep down inside, I wanted to be thrown over his shoulder and carried into his cave.

Beyond him, I could see his bedroom through an open door, a neatly-made bed with a sturdy wood frame and a lot of pillows, a bureau with a large mirror. Beside that open door was a closed one fitted with a deadbolt lock. Between them on the wall was a large, full-length mirror in a heavy frame. I could see the two of us in it, watch his hands linger over my breasts.

"How long have you had them on, Zoe?"

I looked at the clock on the wall. "Maybe an hour and a half?"

"Oh, no! That's far too long, girl! We need to get them off. May I?"

To me, they seemed fine. My breasts felt taut, tingling, aching to be touched, but presumably he knew better than me. I nodded again.

Very softly, very carefully, he removed them, put them on a nearby side table. They gleamed on the dark wood. Then the sensation hit me.

He'd been right. My nipples hurt now - sharp, deep pain to the extent that I sagged forward. I might have collapsed had he not caught me. He held me for a moment, then helped me stand back up. His lips came down, softly, on mine and the tip of his tongue swept slowly and lightly over them as tender hands caressed my breasts, helping to restore blood flow to my nipples.

I moaned with both pleasure and pain.

"Wait a bit," he whispered. "You'll be fine."

His hands left my breasts and began to roam over my stomach and thighs. A gentle finger traced between my legs. Suddenly he pulled away from me, half-kneeling in front of me. A curious finger touched the vibrator's loop protruding from between my labia. His eyes went wide.

"Zoe, are you having your per...?" he stopped, his other hand on my mound obviously feeling the vibrator dance inside me, letting him know that, no, I wasn't wearing a tampon.

"Is this a vibe?" he asked, his eyes wide.

I nodded, this time feeling both embarrassed and proud. "Mm-hmm."

He rose, his face beaming, eyes wide in admiration. "Such daring! Such an adventurous girl! And it's been going all the time?"

"Since I left the house, yes."

"Bewdy! No wonder you have been squirming! Zoe, very few women could endure that for long. Not willingly. Who has the control?"

"Nobody has it. It's by the door in my unit."

"Have you cum yet, Zoe?"

I shook my head. "No. And I really want to! But I promised myself that I wouldn't until I got home."

A curious look came over him, part admiration, part pity. And lust -- I could see that in his eyes. "Oh, but I want you to cum, Zoe. May I help you?"

Seeing the look on my face, he grinned. "No, I didn't mean that, Zoe, although perhaps another time. For right now, I want to get you used to the idea of your orgasms being controlled by somebody else. Perhaps 'guide you' would be a better way of starting it."

I thought for a moment. "How?"

"Well, let's start off by simply removing those lovely ropes. I'd love you to have photos of them first though, especially as it is your first time."

My hesitation must have shown on my face, for he smiled again and said, "Do you have your phone with you, Zoe?"

I nodded.

"Then let me take them with your phone. You would own the photos, not me. But something this significant, this beautiful, this daring should be recorded."

When I nodded again, he brought me my bag. I took out my phone, unlocked it and handed it to him.

For the next minute, he circled me, the phone flashing and clicking. Then, deliberately, he set it down.

"It's time to take them off, Zoe. The effect is so lovely, but I think you'll be impressed with the marks it has left. Just relax now; let's do it together."

He was of course correct, for once the red cords were removed, their image remained their place, a pale 3D photographic negative etched into my flesh. My fingers lingered in them, as did his.

Gideon picked up my phone again and raised an eyebrow. "As you were before, Zoe." I resumed my standing pose and again Gideon's room was filled with flashing lights as he took photo after photo of me.

Meanwhile, the insatiable device within me continued to tease and torment. I tried hard not to cry.

Finished, Gideon stepped back.

"OK," he said, "it's time. Where would you like to go from here? Most subs aren't offered the choice, but you and I are in an odd relationship. I promised you an orgasm, adventurous Zoe. How?"

"I have a choice? And, er, what about you?" I could see the tent in his trousers. It fascinated me. I had seen photos, videos, but never the real thing, in the flesh, so to speak.

It was time.

"Zoe, you are a remarkably pretty girl. You have also shown a sexual daring, an inventiveness which has not only amazed me, but as you see..." here he waved a hand over his groin, "aroused me. And, even more amazing, you did it without seeming a slag.

"I want you, Zoe. I very much want you holding and stroking me, I want you kneeling in front of me, I want you bent over that table, I want you squealing and bucking under me in my bed."

I went scarlet at his bluntness but, unbidden, my hand went forward, stroked his length under the fabric of his trousers. His breath hissed a little.

I let my hand fall away, my eyes falling to the floor again. "I'm sorry. I... I don't know..." My ignorance and, dare I say, innocence must have shone through, for Gideon pulled back from my hand.

"Zoe, do you mean to tell me that you...?"

"Yes. I mean No. I mean not yet."

Both eyebrows went up this time.

"But I think I want to," I said, my heart pounding. "With you. Here. Now."

His face turned serious. "With me, Zoe - yes, too right. Here? Quite possibly."

Then he shook his head. "But now? I don't think so."

"But why?" Dammit! I was so ready! Weren't Aussie boys always ready?

"Perhaps I should have said, 'not quite yet', Zoe. To start off with, are you on any form of birth control?"

I looked down at the floor. "No," I whispered. Inner Zoe smirked -- how could I have overlooked something that obvious?

"Well, there's a big reason right there. And, despite the positive press, condoms don't always work."

I almost started to cry.

"But," he said gently, "I think we can be sure you leave here happy."

I looked down at the floor, not sure what to think.

He took my chin in his hand, aimed my face at his. "Zoe, you are not to cum without permission. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Yes, sir."

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

Within me, the vibrator surged and I bent forward at the waist, unable to hold myself upright.

His voice cut through the sensations. "Zoe - sit up! It is not yet your time!" His hand seized my hair and pulled me upright. My inner Zoe moaned with me. I was a hairbreadth away from orgasm. His hand pulled on my hair, moved my head up to look into his face.

"Not yet, little one. Not yet. Do you understand?" He shook my head softly.

I groaned, nodded my head. "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, sir."

He retrieved my phone and knelt in front of me.

"I want your permission to film you cumming," he said. "Something for us to share later."

I could barely hear him over what seemed to be a thunderous buzzing from inside me. It wasn't the vibrator -- it was pretty silent. It had to be my system reacting to the whole situation.

I nodded.

"Good on ya!" he beamed before placing a large ottoman in the middle of the rug. About a metre square and chair-high, it was covered in brown leather.

"Take off your heels, Zoe," he commanded. "I don't want holes in the leather."

At his direction, I knelt on the box, my knees spread wide.

"Put your hands behind your head, Zoe," he directed. "Show off those beautiful cans. And smile."

Putting my hands back was easy enough and my boobs were indeed pushed forward. Smiling was harder as the almost-breaking orgasm bedevilled me. I tried however and, when I did so, he began filming me, walking in a slow circle around the perimeter of the rug.

After he had made a complete rotation around me, he stopped and squatted down in front of me.

"Play with them, Zoe. Show the audience how fine-looking they are, what magnificent things of beauty and pleasure. Let the camera see how proud of them you are and how much pleasure they can give you."

My hands came down to cup and lift their weight. The fading-but-still-present rope marks in my soft flesh felt very odd.

"Play with your nipples, Zoe, but I remind you not to cum until I give you permission."

With thumbs and forefingers, I pulled them, stretched them, rolled them.

I was too close. Raising my eyes, I looked into the camera lens. "Please, sir, may I cum?"

"I didn't quite catch that, Zoe."

I continued to work my boobs as I repeated myself, my groin pulsing with desire. "Please, sir, may I cum?"

He looked at me, frowned. "No, not yet. But soon."

"Reach down with your fingers, Zoe. Spread your lips for me, for the camera."

I did so and he leaned forward, capturing my exposed pussy in closeup.

"You beauty!" he exclaimed. "Now, holding your lips apart, I want you to gently stroke yourself, up and down. Keep doing that until I tell you to stop."

I traced the length of my pussy with a forefinger, working around the plastic cord from the vibe. Fire sirens were going off inside me. I was pretty sure my eyes were crossed.

"Stop." His voice was sharp, commanding.

A tear of sheer frustration leaked from my eye. I looked up at him to see both pleasure on his face -- and, I thought, admiration.

Meanwhile, the damned vibrator would simply not let me focus. It took all my concentration to not explode in front of him.

"I don't think I can do this much longer, Gideon. Please, please let me cum!"

"Not yet. If I can endure watching you naked in front of me, you can wait, too."

"Please?"

"No." The refusal was flat.

My inner Zoe was shrieking with delight. It was this I had been dreaming of, of being dominated, controlled, used for somebody else's pleasure and as an instrument of their sexual will -- and whim. My body protested the torment of overwhelming sensations, my captive mind purred in happy contentment.

After a minute -- an endless minute -- Gideon told me to start playing with my clit.

"Softly, gently, round and round, Zoe. And you are not allowed to cum. This is not for your pleasure, but for mine and the camera's."

My world was comprised of nothing more than sensation now. With a well-lubricated fingertip, I teased, stimulated and circled as much of my love bud as I could reach around that damned vibrator.

I also tried everything I could dream of to hold off against a steadily-building storm of responsiveness. I think my eyes were crossing.

Finally, Gideon smiled from behind the camera. "All right, Zoe, cum for me."

A second later, waves of lightning burst from my clit, rippling out across and along my entire body. My nipples felt like they were on fire. I was exploding, melting, falling into a cloud of incandescent butterflies. It was an ongoing explosion of pleasure - endless, timeless, limitless.

It went on and on and on. Throughout it, Gideon encouraged me, praised me. His words stoked the fires and pushed me higher than I could ever have possibly imagined. I sobbed as his fingers roved over my breasts and inner thighs, encouraging and fanning my delight.

This was it. It was precisely this I had been dreaming of all these years -- being controlled, used by a loving, knowledgeable man. The ongoing, onrushing orgasm was amazing, but the mental satisfaction was even better.

I wanted this. I wanted him doing this. It felt right, exactly how I imagined it would be to be dominated. I wanted his hands on me, I wanted to feel owned, I wanted his merciless, uncompromising love.

Eventually, it slowed down to the point where I could gingerly pull out the vibrator and, with trembling fingers, turn it off.

Gideon picked me up tenderly and carried me to the nearby sofa. He sat down with me on his lap and hugged me lovingly, patting my head, stroking my shoulders and back.

"You were amazing, Zoe," he said softly. "I'm very proud of you."

I had never felt so loved, so cherished, so complete. Never had I felt such purpose in my life.

I noticed a hardness between us, gradually softening. On impulse, I wiggled my bum against it.

"Stop it, Zoe," he said gently. "There'll be lots of time for that another day. Assuming..."

I was pretty sure what he meant.

I was willing to make that assumption.

Oh, yes.

"When, Gideon?" I asked.

He thought for a long while before handing me my phone.

"When you are willing to share those photos, Zoe."

In response, I leaned my head on his shoulder. It was enough.

**Zoe, Again**

"How's your cappuccino?" Claire asked.

I'd been miles away. Startled, I raised my head, tried to smile.

"Um, good. Good, thanks."

I found Claire somewhat intimidating at the best of times.

"Gideon said you would have the photos for us," she said.

"Us?" I was a little shocked at the implications.

Back up...

After years of contemplating my exhibitionist tendencies, I'd only recently dared to dip my toe into the water, so to speak.

Gathering all my courage, I'd tied myself into a shibari harness, leaving my arms and legs free. Over it I wore a casual but dressy skirt and blouse.

And under it a vibrator.

The idea had been for me to take a tram well away from my flat, get off and walk back - without having an orgasm in public.

I still think I might have made it.

I'd also resolved to stop for a coffee on Collins Street, just to prolong things. Sitting there, squirming slightly as the vibrator spun up and down within me, I'd been noticed by Claire and Gideon. She had noticed that I was wearing something unusual under my blouse, but it had been Gideon who had recognized me for what I was.

Dismissing her politely, Gideon had taken me to his nearby flat. While remaining fully dressed himself, he'd guided and directed me through my first real sexual experience - undressing in front of him to expose the rope harness and then slowly masturbating myself until, after much delay, he'd given his permission for my orgasm. All the while, he'd taken endless photos and videos of me on my own phone.

Throughout the experience, he had directed me, controlled me, encouraged me. He'd been exactly what I'd dreamed of all my adult life - a strong, commanding and yet compassionate man to instruct and compel and use me.

It had been the best day of my life.

He'd also let me know that the only way for us to go any further was for me to trust him with the photos and videos now on my phone.

Yesterday, I'd texted him to say Yes.

But instead of Gideon waiting for me at the coffee shop as I had expected, it had been Claire.

She was sitting at the same table where I had first met them, wearing a long, sleeveless white lace dress with a plunging neckline. On her feet, were a pair of t-strap sandals; I didn't recognize the brand, but wished I could, if only to be properly jealous. Her only jewelry was her heavy gold linked necklace and an elegant gold wristwatch. Her makeup was, as before, perfect.

She was utterly beautiful, the embodiment of femininity. To my eyes, she seemed entirely confident.

I realized how outclassed I was by this woman. I wilted, just a little, before taking a deep breath in an attempt to regain my nerve.

Looking around, I saw the two of us in a nearby mirror.

Beside the reflection of the tall, black-haired beauty, I saw my smaller figure, my blonde hair in a rough bob cut.

Intellectually, I knew that I was attractive, that my figure drew admiring looks from the boys, but looking at us in the mirror, I felt entirely second-best.

I was pretty; Claire was gorgeous. I had a nice figure; hers was stellar. She had poise, confidence - charisma if it came to that. I was struggling with every insecurity in the book.

And - and - she was Gideon's friend, quite probably a great deal more than that.

In short, Claire had womanly power; all I had were girlish hopes.

It was those hopes which had led me to again show up wearing Gran's triskelion necklace, the one I'd worn when I first met Claire and Gideon. I'd known its BDSM connotation from the first, but it had taken Gideon a lot of effort to get me to acknowledge that link when first we'd met.

Today, thinking I'd meet Gideon again, not only was I wearing the necklace, but I'd again left both knickers and bra in the drawer. Unlike my first excursion however, I had today dared to wear a simple white blouse. That decision had met with Inner Zoe's unqualified support. I figured that I would be fine unless we got hit with an unseasonal rain shower.

Turning away from the mirror, I looked down towards my knees before realizing to my shock that I was backlighted by the sun shining in through the window of the cafe. My breasts were clearly visible through the thin cotton.

I turned scarlet. I was prepared for almost anything, but not such an open display of... what?

Wasn't my intent to risk detection, to take it to the limit? But now I'd been detected.

Again.

At that realization, Inner Zoe began laughing her head off.

"They're very nice, Zoe," Claire said softly. Damn it, could she read my mind?

Despite my embarrassment, for I was for some reason reassured. It would have been so very easy for her to have humiliated me.

Without responding, I reached into my purse and pulled out a flash drive, pushed it across the table. She picked it up without examining it and put it into her own bag, rose to depart.

"He'll be in touch, dear."

"Um, OK?"

She rose, started to leave, but stopped when I spoke her name. "Claire?"

"Yes?" Armoured in her imperiousness, she said it without turning back, as if it - and I - didn't matter.

"You can tell Gideon I've got my implant."

At that, she turned to look at me.

"Implant? Birth control?"

"Yes."

Her face was impassive. Had I pleased her or annoyed her? Worse, did she now see me as a rival? I didn't know.

She looked at me, her face expressionless behind her large, round sunnies. It occurred to me that I had no idea what colour her eyes actually were.

"Don't hurt him, Zoe," she said very softly, her face impassive. "I mean that. Don't you ever hurt him. If you do, I'll find you even if you hide in the back of beyond."

With that, she wheeled and left, her superb behind swaying from side to side.

I was stunned. First off, there was a very, very real menace in her statement and I realized that I did not want her as an enemy. I decided that I needed to woo Claire, to make her like me, or, at the least, accept me.

Oddly, I also sensed fear - or, at the very least, concern - in her voice. This from a woman who on the surface appeared to be completely self-confident, possessed of everything any girl could wish. And, very curiously, it was concern for Gideon, the man who had to me seemed so powerful, so full of strength! How very peculiar.

There was obviously much I had to learn about both Gideon and about Claire.

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"Hello, Zoe," said her voice on the phone. "Gideon asked me to call. He's having a small party Friday next and wonders if you could make it."

"What sort of party?" I asked. (Not that it would make any difference. If Gideon asked, I would be there.)

"A casual dinner party. Quite intimate. Don't bother dressing formally or anything."

"Oh. Oh, yes, I'd love to!"

"Good! Gideon said to indulge your fancies."

Now that put things in a different light entirely. Gideon - and by now Claire - knew precisely what sort of 'fancies' on my part had first brought us together. While not a blatant invitation to get kinky, it was at least an invitation and quite possibly a strong hint.

"I'll be there," I said, firmly. "What may I bring?"

"Just you." With that, she hung up.

I thought of how her voice had sounded. Was she upset? If so, was she upset at me for Gideon's interest? Was she irritated at Gideon for having her relay his invitation? Or upset at both of us for that afternoon in his flat? I couldn't decide and it bothered me.

In reality, I didn't know that much about Gideon and Claire. I thought Claire had implied the party was to be... quirky.

But was it really? What if I was wrong and showed up in some form of sexy costume when everybody else was not? or what if I arrived in a party dress and everybody else was...?

I felt lost. Was this a test of some sort? A challenge? Or even a teaching point, something one or both of them wanted me to learn from, possibly by making mistakes, maybe even embarrassing ones?

I thought of calling her back, but decided against it. I didn't want to appear too naïve and, if it was a test, I'd have blown it right there.

Well, what did I want?

For once, Inner Zoe and I were in full agreement. I knew that I wanted Gideon - on whatever terms he offered. I had never felt so fulfilled as during that time in his flat. I had never felt so much a woman, so ready to offer myself, so eager to be accepted.

But where to go from that? I was uncertain, confused.

In the end, I decided to go back to what had brought us together in the first place.

Less the vibrator.

I decided not to use rope this time. Rather, I could get 'dressy' under my clothes with something both more and less traditional. If the party was 'conventional', it could stay hidden. If not...

After a lot of really fun research on the net, I decided on fine gold-coloured chains. I'd done a basic jewellery-making hobby course when I'd first arrived in Melbourne and knew a gem store where I could get everything but a couple of key items. Those last I knew I could find at Kay's, the upscale sex shop where I'd bought the shibari cords for my first big adventure.

I was excited - turned on - throughout my shopping trip. I could feel sexual tension throughout my body. I was darned near ready to explode by the time I got home.

I ran my fingers under the hem of my panties, then stopped. I found that I liked being on the edge and, if - as I hoped - the party would be my Big Day, then I wanted to not lose it. I wanted to walk in there tingling, so to speak. Silly, perhaps, but that was the plan.

I'd settled on a two-piece design, like a bikini - much skimpier, of course.

The bottom had one length of chain running around my waist like a belt, falling down in front and held together by a gold-coloured triskelion about the size of a dollar coin over my mound. From there, two more chains passed between my legs, one on either side of my labia, and ran up between my cheeks to join the waist chain at the small of my back.

The top part had a simple two-strand necklace descending to my breastbone, from which hung a matching triskelion. From that, two more double loops of chain fell almost to my navel before rising back up to my breasts, where they were anchored off a pair of simple elastic nipple loops.

I confess that it was hard to keep my hands off myself while I was working on them. Knowing what they were intended for was exciting and my mind kept drifting to various fantasies - hopes? - of what would be happening at Gideon's flat.

When I eventually finished them, I slipped both pieces on and examined myself in the mirror.

It all lay flat enough to be essentially invisible under clothing.

Minus the clothing, it was not so much a costume as it was gift wrap - a screaming exhortation to jump me.

Inner Zoe screamed her approval. Someday, I thought, it would be real gold. Just you wait, world!

I had a little black party dress which would show off the top medallion well and a pretty good pair of black heels. With that, I was satisfied - and very, very eager.

Truth be told, I was also a bit frightened. This might be my 'coming out' party, so to speak, my chance to actually gain entry into Gideon's world, or at least what I imagined his world would be.

Before my walk that day, I'd dreamed of somebody like him. My time in his flat had been a dream come true, even if he'd grown a conscience and refused to take me to his bed.

I'd so wanted that. The feeling of rejection still lingered, a fear that I just wasn't pretty enough, interesting enough to please him.

The day of the party, I took the afternoon off.

I took a long shower, waxed, did my hair and got meticulous about my makeup. I wasn't normally a big-makeup kind of girl, but this evening probably warranted it. I nibbled on some dates and tried to compose myself.

Eventually, time passing, I put on the chain outfit. Turning again in front of the mirror, I felt myself again becoming more than just a little excited. Before that café, I'd never met a boy I'd cared to lose my virginity to. Within an hour of meeting Gideon, I was ready.

And he'd turned me down. He was being responsible, fair, but it still had stung.

But tonight, I had my hopes. I felt like Jacqueline's Natalie - totally inexperienced but completely willing, utterly ready. This was, I hoped, Zoe's Day.

The bob cut made my hair look super-sophisticated and was easy to bring back with but a few minutes in front of a mirror. I didn't need Inner Zoe's cheering to tell me I looked good.

I pulled the black dress over my arms and wiggled it into place before doing up the row of buttons in the front. It took me a minute of experimenting to decide whether I should button it low enough to show some good cleavage (and the chains below the triskelion) or do up one more button and just show the medallion itself. In the end, I decided to let the medallion talk for my boobs and left the button done up.

I ran my hands down over the dress to smooth it out and spun again in front of the mirror. Perfect - sleek as a seal, girl!

I put a minimal purse together, slipped into my heels, picked up the bottle of wine I'd put by the door and left. Even though movement of the harness was somewhat inhibited by the fabric of my dress, I could feel it pulling on my nipples as my unconstrained breasts moved with each step.

I liked the feeling.

20 minutes later, the tram dropped me a block from Gideon's flat.

I buzzed his door from the street. In seconds, I heard the sound of the latch admitting me to the building. Taking a deep breath, I made my way up the marble stairs to the first floor.

As I walked up, I listened for music, conversation - any indication of the party having started. More uncertain than ever, I began worrying about being the first to arrive, of being seen as too eager.

It was dead quiet on the stairs. There was not a sound.

Had I got the time wrong? Maybe even the date? I didn't think I had. I kept walking.

When I knocked, Claire opened the door.

I clearly hadn't needed to worry about being overexposed, for Claire's outfit consisted of her gold necklace, heels and a peignoir so sheer that the floor-length garment could have been stuffed into a teacup. No more substantial than a morning mist enveloping her body, it was both less and much, much more than plain nudity.

I could see that each of Claire's small nipples was pierced with a tiny gold barbell, clearly visible through the diaphanous fabric. The ends matched the links in her necklace; their gold colour contrasted perfectly with the skin beneath them.

And perfume. Too much of the perfume sold these days is so bold as to be almost tyrannical. This was subtle, but mind-consuming in its richness. It didn't fight her looks for my attention, it complimented them, amplified them.

My eyes must have bulged a little, for she smiled. This smile however was gracious and warm and made it clear that I was indeed welcome. It also confirmed that Claire was totally confident with her body image, in her near-nudity.

I so wanted to be Claire.

I felt my body shivering and not from cold. Although I'd never walked that side of the street, I suddenly realize that if I couldn't have Claire as my friend, I might not mind having her as my lover.

She pretended to ignore my expression and called, "Gideon! Look who's here!" Why she had to raise her voice I didn't know, for there seemed to be only the three of us there.

Gideon was a slender man, with just a bit of grey showing in his dark hair and short, well-trimmed beard. Right then, he was across the flat, in the kitchen taking up one corner of the large room. Being thus greeted by Claire, I was somewhat disappointed to see him dressed in a casual set of daks and a white shirt buttoned about half-way up.

I wasn't sure what exactly I'd been hoping for, of course. My daydreams hadn't been that specific.

He waved casually at me, smiling brightly before returning to his cooking. "Get her a drink!" was all that he said.

I looked around. It was clear that there were only the three of us in the flat.

"Am I early?" I asked Claire.

She gave a low giggle. "No, but I did say it was to be a small party."

At that moment, I noticed a table set with, yes, just three places.

"Oh."

This wasn't turning out anything how I had thought it would. On the other hand, my fears about my lack of social graces and inexpereience in front of Gideon's friends would be easier to keep on a leash this way.

In short order, Claire had put a drink into my hands. I took it gratefully.

A moment later, Gideon put a lid on a pot and came over to give me a hug, which grew into a three-way hug when Claire joined in. I wasn't sure whose hand it was that cuddled my bum, but knew that I liked it either way.

Breaking the hug, Gideon motioning Claire and I towards a nearby couch. Waiting for us both to be seated, he sat on a matching overstuffed chair opposite.

Between us was the leather-covered ottoman on which Gideon had positioned me for my first display. I felt my mouth go dry at the memory.

"Thank you for coming, Zoe," Gideon said, raising his glass in a toast.

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything," I replied, "but I thought there would be more people."

"Three's enough," he smiled.

Putting down his drink, he reached behind his chair and produced a rectangular object wrapped in a heavy brown paper and sealed with plain sticky tape. He passed it to me. "A memory," was all he said.

Curious, I weighed it in my hands. It was not overly heavy. Perhaps 18" long, it felt like a framed photo of some sort.

He and Claire both looked at me with an encouraging look on their faces. I opened it to find a neatly-framed photo of me, taken by Gideon in this very room. I was kneeling on the ottoman, my knees apart, my hands behind my neck. The shibari cords had just been removed, but their marks could still be clearly seen in my flesh. My eyes were open, bold, almost wanton.

I looked amazing.

More than I could have thought possible. Gideon had captured precisely how I had imagined myself. Looking at the photo, I remembered perfectly how it had felt - the incredible arousal, the longing, the hope, the thrill, the soul-twisting satisfaction. I hadn't thought that I could possibly look that sexy, that desirable. My doubts about myself ebbed, just a little.

I looked up to see both of them beaming at me.

"Thank you," I said softly. I was amazed, pleased and very, very touched.

Claire leaned in and kissed me, chastely, on my lips. My heart soared - did this mean she viewed me as a friend?

"We looked through all of them and I was certain that this was the best one," she said.

That statement gave me another clue as to their relationship, I realized.

Standing up, her gaze turned to Gideon.

"Gideon," she said to him, "I get the feeling that both you and Zoe need to shed some clothes. I'm pretty sure she has something special underneath - look at her necklace."

Gideon looked at it and me. One eyebrow went up in curiosity.

Claire gave a small smile, "I told her we didn't dress for dinner."

I looked from one to the other.

He smiled back in obvious pleasure. At that, I felt something begin to grow within me, something I wasn't sure of - something uncertain, something curious, something daring - maybe all three at once.

"Indeed we do not," he siad. "Zoe, would you mind if I got 'more comfortable'?"

I shook my head.

With that, while Gideon didn't move, Claire got up from beside me and, kneeling gracefully before him, began unbuttoning his shirt. Gideon's grey eyes were riveted to mine - waiting to see my reaction, perhaps?

What he had to have seen was anticipation, delight, curiosity - all good, from my point of view.

Claire tugged his shirt tails out of his Daks, unbuttoned the last button and pushed the garment off his shoulders and down his arms. Rising, she took the shirt, folded it neatly and placed it down beside him.

Wordlessly, the man rose to his feet. Claire unbuckled his belt, undid the button and the trousers slid down his legs to the floor. He lifted one leg and then the other; Claire retrieved and then folded them, placed them on top of his shirt.

Underneath, Gideon was wearing white mesh briefs. The fabric wasn't far off being transparent. His tackle was clearly visible through the mesh fabric; both his flacid length and the balls looming behind it might as well have been in fishnet. Although I had seen lots of pictures and videos, these were the first I had ever seen in real life.

Gideon, while slender, was anything but skinny. It was obvious that he worked out regularly and while not beefy and bulging, his muscles were certainly well-defined. Such body body hair as he had was curly, dark.

He seemed to me to be the epitome of masculinity. I found him deeply, endlessly desirable and I felt my breath catch as I looked at him.

He and Claire both smiled. They obviously knew what was going through my mind.

Saying not a word as he gazed at me, he merely raised that eyebrow again in inquiry. Given my lack of experience, he obviously knew that this was not the time for commands.

"If you wish," Claire said in an encouraging voice.

I wished.

I had been wishing this for a long time. I just hadn't known how to define it.

"May I help?" she added.

Much as I wanted more of both of them, right then it seemed important that it be his hands, not hers, first touching me.

"I've got it, thanks."

I stood up and unbuttoned the dress. I shivered my shoulders just slightly and the black fabric flowed down over my body to gather around my feet , exposing the harness on my body.

I squatted down to pick up the dress. Folding it, I dropped it on the sofa beside me and, heart on overdrive, stood up for their inspection. I looked at the two of them and was very pleased to see wide-eyed, open approval on both faces.

Gideon's eyes lingered on my body, ran slowly up from ankles to face, then back again.

"Turn around," he said and I spun slowly for his inspection.

His hands came together in soft but emotive applause. "Nice," he said. "Very nice!"

Claire on the other hand simply stood, stepped over to me, leaned down and drew my lips against hers in a soft but ardent kiss. Her tongue traced my inner lips, swept along my teeth. When she pulled away, her eyes were shining. She ran her fingers along the links, slowly. I could feel one tiny link after another pass under her touch and felt the sensation all the way down to my toes.

For some reason, I no longer minded her being first.

Dinner - as much of it as I can remember it - was grilled prawns with lemon and garlic. They were outstanding, wonderfully complimented by white wine and a green salad. Gideon, for it had been his work, was an admirable cook.

In one sense, it was a simple yet proper meal served by an welcoming couple to a new friend. On the other, even Inner Zoe was silenced in her awe at the profundity of its sexual nature.

I could look through the glass of the round table top and see both his mesh-enclosed manbits and her shaven sex. I enjoyed the view and relished the thought that they were both getting an equivalent view of me.

I'd not pictured my night going this way, but was thrilled in every way. I felt the chains between my legs rub gently on my labia as I leaned over to pass the wine to Gideon, felt the overhead fan's gentle breeze on my excited nipples.

It was so very, very odd, I thought. Here I was, stark naked, in the midst of that most pedestrian activity - eating dinner. Was this how it was supposed to be? I was uncertain, but definitely approved.

I found myself both grateful and a bit awed that this amazing couple had been so generous, so accepting, to include me in this.

Dinner ended simply, with Claire merely rising to take the dishes to the kitchen and stacking them in the sink.

As she did so, Gideon leaned back with a smile, openly admiring my breasts over the table. In another situation, I would have been embarrassed or angry. Tonight, I was delighted and leaned back just slightly to better emphasize them.

"I'm so very glad you decided to come tonight," he said as Claire returned. "May we show you something now?"

I nodded. What I wanted more than anything was to be shown the path to womanhood, but I had, frankly, fallen in love with Claire as much as with Gideon. She was everything I wanted to be. I ached with desire for them both. One, or the other or both - I wanted...

No - needed. 'Want' was last year.

It was Claire who took my hand and led me to the second door, beside the open one to the bedroom. Gideon followed. At the door, he took my other hand, leaned in and offered his lips to me for a kiss. How could I refuse? My head swam as our lips met; I felt Claire's hand clutch mine in encouragement as his whiskers brushed my chin.

Breaking the kiss, Gideon pushed open the door. I felt my breath catch as I saw what was inside.

I was not really surprised to find that it was a dungeon, but there was definitely nothing the slightest bit medieval about it.

The room itself was modern and quite large, easily as roomy as Gideon's substantial living room. The furniture it held was widely-spaced, giving an open and, paradoxically, almost welcoming impression. Here and there were overstuffed chairs. A large television hung on one wall. A series of wooden cabinets ran along the wall opposite.

Immaculately clean, it was decorated in light browns with a tan carpet and taupe-painted walls. An array of pot lights provided excellent illumination without being overly bright.

Were it not for the blatantly sexual nature of the setup, it might have been a high-end art gallery waiting for potential patrons to admire the works on display.

Heavy tracks on the ceiling supported pulleys, anchor points and eyebolts. There was a large bed in one corner - a four-poster with a tasteful bedspread, no less. A five-pointed star made of heavy timber and easily seven feet tall leaned against one wall. Assorted pieces of wood and metal furniture filled the room. I knew what many of them were and could guess at some of the rest, but was unsure what they were all called. I felt myself tingle as I looked at the display and considered the promise it offered for my education.

I'd been excited before Gideon had opened the door, but as I took in the display I felt myself becoming so much more so.

There were two or three smallish windows up high on one wall. There was nothing to be seen beyond them. Scattered between the windows, higher up than pictures would normally be displayed, hung a line of framed photographs - photographs of both men and women.

All were nicely framed and of professional or near-professional quality. While all involved nudity and sexuality, none had that creepy, greasy air which characterizes so much porn. These were done with talent, respect, almost with love.

The photo closest to the door was of a woman walking through a forest, ferns around her feet and knees. She was dressed in an ankle-length cloak with the hood up over her head. While the rest of the photo was in black and white, the cloak was a bold scarlet, its fiery folds falling in plunging waves to her feet.

The front of the cloak was open, exposing the magnificent naked form within. The lighting however was from overhead and the woman's face and much of her body were invisible in shadow. Indeed, what could mostly be seen were her heavy breasts, the top of one thigh and, somewhat more dimly, her stomach and one hip.

One bare foot was pushed forward by her stride. Around the ankle was buckled a sturdy yet elegant leather cuff, a heavy metal ring on its side.

The photo next to it was of Claire. She was lying back in an armchair and wearing nothing but a most elegant underbust corset with lace trim. Her dark hair flowed over her shoulders.

Her posture and expression were very calm, almost tranquil. An empty champagne flute was held loosely in her right hand. She was looking away from the camera, off to one side. While relaxed, her expression was attentive, strong. She seemed utterly content, utterly confident in her sex.

Her feet were propped up on an ottoman in front of her, showing off her long legs to advantage. The angle was such that it was impossible to tell whether or not she was wearing knickers. Her breasts on the other hand were bare and I felt a pang of jealousy at their perfection.

If one discounted her costume, it was an utterly casual, innocent pose, as if she had been caught watching television on a slow night. I found myself becoming as envious of Claire's poise as I had been of her boobs. Then I noticed something else and became even more fascinated.

A chromed curb-link chain wrapped twice around one ankle then pooled on top of the ottoman before leading off-screen. The chain was not obvious; indeed, it was almost hidden by Claire's other ankle and its shadow. Once noticed however, one's eyes were drawn to it over and over. I couldn't decide whether it had been an actual tether or whether it had just been draped over her ankle as a prop. In either case, it was remarkable, doubly so given her serene expression.

The image had that extraordinary mix of controlled elegance and casual carnality which I was learning exemplified Claire's daily life. Her expression was one of cool indifference, yet there was also an air of innocence, almost of vulnerability, which I found hard to understand.

"They're amazing!" I breathed, not daring to pull my eyes away from the images. I was afraid they would see my blush of excitement.

"Thank you," they said, almost in unison.

"Who took the photos?" I asked.

"Gideon," Claire said.

I motioned with my hand towards the other photos. "May I?"

"Of course."

Ignoring the furniture, equipment and trappings around me, I walked along the wall with my head up, inspecting the dozen or so other photographs.

The third photo had been taken in front of a pair of very tall wooden doors, something one might expect in a fairy-tale palace.

A woman, wearing but a dark thong or G-string, was standing in the door. Her arms and legs were spread-eagled across the doorway, tethered with thumb-thick ropes. Gideon, dressed in a tuxedo with a rose at his lapel, stood half in front of her, holding her waist and molding her body to his. His head was lowered towards her as if for a kiss.

The doors behind her were slightly ajar and beyond them could be seen a dining room with table set and candles lit for a very formal dinner. I got the impression that the woman would soon either be released to join the meal - no doubt dressed as she was - or else would be left standing there, displayed for the visual gratification of the unseen diners when they arrived.

Another image featured a nude woman standing in front of a set of filmy curtains.

The light from outside was very bright and had silhouetted the woman's figure. Her breasts were generous and the one nipple which could be seen was erect. Her arms were held up, crossed above her head, by a chain leading up and out of sight towards the ceiling. Her head was raised just slightly and I could see that her hair reached almost to her waist.

I found myself becoming more and more stirred by the photos. Clearly Gideon was an expert with a camera and possessed of magnificent and imaginative vision. The photos were wonderfully artistic, with their eroticism more presented for thoughtful consideration than flung in the viewer's face.

Behind me as I walked, Gideon and Claire were silent. I turned around once to find their arms around each other's waists. If it wasn't love for each other on their faces, it was at the least deep affection and I envied them for it.

The couple in the next photo were unknown to me. A naked man was bent backwards over a waist-high padded bench, his limbs pulled back and down, tethered to its base with elaborate ropework. Between his legs knelt a young - very young - woman.

As petite as the man was muscular, her dark, dishevelled hair barely reached her shoulders. While clearly nude, only one breast could be seen, just peaking over one of his thighs.

The man on the other hand was completely exposed, his erection massive, the rim of its swollen head almost sharp with pressure. The girl's pale hand was wrapped around it, her thumb pressing under the crown.

The expression on her face was one of calm attention to the task before her; that on his face was the torment of lust too long denied.

Another - merely the naked back of a standing woman, from shoulder blades to upper thighs. Chromed handcuffs encircled her wrists and biceps, chromed chains connected the manacles and hung down off the bottom of the photograph. Her bum was flawless.

A side shot of a slender young woman with very long, very pale hair squatting on her heels, a look of both surprise and puzzlement on her face as she faced the camera. The polished floor below her was very shiny and one could see an almost perfect reflection of her feet and high heeled shoes. Her arms were resting on her knees and from one hand hung a white egret plume.

Next, a table-sized flat rock, half-submerged in the middle of a pond. Ripples flowed out from the rock through beds of reeds to the shore in the distance. On the rock lay a nude woman, her light hair coiled behind her head. She was resting up on one elbow, looking down along her long legs to feet partly submerged in the clear water. Her expression was calm, but rather pensive.

From out of the water emerged a chain, each massive link the size of a large man's hand. The woman's hand was resting inside the last link. It was clear that she could have easily removed her hand should she had so wished, but some reason had chosen not to. Her free hand resting on her hip held a long-stemmed rose, its blossoms almost but not quite lying between her breasts.

There was a headshot of an unshaven, unspeakably handsome youth wearing a leather blindfold. A slim female hand was about to present a shapely breast to his lips.

Beside them in the next frame was a woman in a round-necked white dress with wide, flowing sleeves. The dress was long enough that her bare toes could just be seen. A broad leather collar encircled her neck. Her arms were outstretched and back, her bosom pushed forward. The fabric was thin enough that her dark nipples showed clearly. One hand rested on the hilt of an elaborate longsword, its blade protruding from a large rock by her feet. A slight smile, perhaps one of resolution or devotion to a cause, was on her lips.

I was amazed by the precision of Gideon's work. Each piece was perfect - perfectly envisioned, perfectly executed, perfectly erotic. Yet, while all were highly sensual, none of them were smutty. This was art in the finest sense of the word.

I was awed. It was as if Gideon had created this miniature gallery just for me, in anticipation of my coming.

I realized that I wanted to be the girl in each of those pictures. It was what I had dreamed of my whole life without knowing it. Had Gideon known? Was I that transparent?

Then I noticed that there was an empty space on the wall, the right size for the photo they had just given me. I also realized that the frame of my photo was identical to those hanging on the wall.

Was this an invitation?

I turned to the two of them. "You're missing one, aren't you?"

Claire looked up at Gideon. He nodded, as if in response to a silent question.

The two stepped closer to me, within touching distance.

He smiled. "That depends. Let's think on it, Zoe. For right now, what would you like?"

That was the elephant in the room. He knew what I wanted and it was certain that Claire knew as well. The costumes they had chosen for dinner with me were utterly explicit and mine, I thought, made my own desires and inclinations very clear. But did I dare?

My eyes slid from his face to Claire's. I wasn't sure what I would find there. To my relief - surprise? wonder? - there was a gentle smile on her face. My breath caught at the warmth of that obvious permission.

Claire took my hand and placed it in Gideon's before clasping them together. "I think that that's what you want, isn't it, Zoe?" She leaned over and kissed first me and then Gideon before stepping back.

The look in his eyes was one of total love. It was love for Claire, I knew that, but I wasn't going to let this opportunity slide.

I smiled at her in gratitude and squeezed Gideon's hand. Turning away from her, I faced him. This was no time for virginal modesty, not with this couple, not here, not now.

With my free hand, I reached down and with one gentle finger stroked the length of his organ inside its mesh container. It responded by noticeably growing.

"This," I said. "I want this, Gideon. I want you."

He smiled at me. His hands came up to cradle my head and he drew me in, his lips waiting for mine. I met him, tongue exploring for his.

I could feel that kiss all the way down to my toes. I could feel a bolt of arousal shoot through me like fire, inflaming every bit.

Gideon's hands moved from my hips, up my waist and onto my breasts, ran lightly over my skin, played with the chains. His hands seemed to have been created to provide me intense stimulation, perfect pleasure. Despite inept fumbling by early boyfriends - or more probably because of it - I had never imagined how wonderful it would be to have my breasts properly attended to. My nipples were applauding.

His strong thumbs flipped the elastic loops off them and the chains fell to below my waist. Free of the chains, his fingers played with my welcoming orbs while his thumbs rolled my nipples. I shuddered at the feeling grew. My kisses grew more demanding, more insistent.

Please, sir, I want some more!

I began running my hands up and down his torso. I grasped his bum to pull him in towards me and felt a growing bulge in his briefs against my stomach.

"I want to see it!" I told him and, wriggling out of his grasp, dropped to my knees in front of him. I ran hands across the taut fabric, thrilled to witness Gideon's obvious reaction to my efforts. Sticking my thumbs in his waist-band, I tugged the briefs down, letting them fall to his ankles and giving me my first real-life view of a man.

OK, I might have been virginal, but that wasn't the same thing as entirely innocent. This was after all the age of the internet and I'd studied.

But Cosmo articles and porn videos were one thing. This was another, the real deal. I closed my eyes, inhaled.

With that, I could smell him. It was more than just a scent of aftershave or soap. An indefinable masculine odour filled my nostrils.

Opening my eyes, his tip was just inches from my face. The first thing I noticed was the slit at its very end. Entranced, I lifted one hand and ran a fingertip over his crown.

It bounced, twitched under my finger. I giggled and was surprised to hear my laughter echoed by Claire.

Turning my head, I saw her sitting just a few metres away on a low-backed chair beside the canopied bed. Her legs were spread and her fingers covering her sex. Her eyes were fixed on Gideon and I.

"It's cute, isn't it?" she asked, one finger moving slowly between flawless thighs.

I turned from her, back to Gideon. I reached out and grasped it, almost apprehensively, by the shaft. I raised my head, looked up to see him smiling down at me.

"That's it," he said softly. "It won't bite."

I was in my innocence surprised at how warm it was, how soft and yet so hard underneath.

I gave Gideon a tentative smile, then, stretching out my tongue, I ran its tip over the slit. There was not much taste, but his shaft twitched under my hand. I giggled to myself, gave a broad lick, starting at its base and running up to its head.

"Oh, yes!" came his voice. Encouraged, I repeated it, then again. Its head swelled in front of my eyes. I leaned forward and took it in my mouth, leaned forward until it was almost touching my throat. Holding his balls in one hand and pumping the loose skin of his shaft with my other, I sucked in and began to bob my head back and forth.

After a few strokes, I pulled off him and looked up.

"How's that?" I asked.

"Wonderful," Gideon replied. "Don't stop."

I returned to my task. From beside me, I heard Claire's gentle encouragement. "Don't be afraid, Zoe. He likes a lot of tongue work, dear."

I stole a glance at her. One hand was playing with the barbell in her right nipple while two fingers from the other were deep inside her sex. Wide-eyed and breathing deeply, she was smiling broadly at the spectacle in front of her.

I began to speed up my attentions - faster, harder. I wasn't entirely prepared for what I figured would happen, but I was certainly eager to experience it.

Gideon sidetracked those thoughts when he pulled back, out of my mouth. His hands lifted me to my feet. He leaned down to kiss me and whatever scraps of arousal had somehow missed me thundered in like an avalanche. His hands - so strong, so loving, so demanding - swept over my skin, dragging chain links as they passed. I wanted his hands on me everywhere, forever.

He bent down, swept me into his arms and carried me to the bed. Laying me down on it with my legs hanging off one side, he knelt between them before lifting them up and onto his shoulders.

His tongue ran slowly up the inside of one thigh. My hands grabbed handfuls of the bedspread, holding on as if I was afraid of falling off in some bizarre gravity shift. I rolled my head to one side to see Claire's face, eyes closed, her breasts heaving.

Gideon traced the length of my lower lips with his tongue tip, repeated it again and again, shifting the chains of my costume out of the way as he did so. It felt electric, the sensations shooting the length and breadth of my body.

I pulled his head into me more firmly with both hands. Hearing cries of female arousal and opening my eyes, I could see that Claire was drifting away in her own world of erotic pleasure.

I tried to move my legs closer together, but his strong arms on my knees kept my thighs well-spread, giving him better access as his lips gently grasped and pulled on my labia.

His thumbs began to enter my vag, first one, then both, stretching, massaging. My one-finger explorations had never gone this far; the feeling was like nothing I had ever felt. I was panting in my need.

"Gideon..." was all I could say. "Gideon..." Over and over.

His head lifted off me as he stood up. Strong arms came around my waist, lifted me, turned me so that I was more fully on the bed. I sensed him kneeling between my legs and was thrilled to feel his masculine weight lowering onto me.

Strangely, he didn't feel heavy.

"Zoe?" his voice said softly.

Against my will, my eyes opened to see his face inches above mine, gentle concern on his face.

"I want you, Zoe. I said so last time. You can say No now." He paused. "Or..."

Even as aroused as he clearly was, he was still considerate, still thinking of me. I hoped, prayed, that if this developed further, he would remain this thoughtful. I desperately wanted to be taken, but knew I needed a guide both firm and gentle.

"Yes!" I whispered, then, finding my voice, repeated myself more loudly. "Yes!"

His only reply was to lean down to kiss me.

His hips lifted a little and I felt his arm between us. Then I felt a strange-but-welcome sensation, a blunt probing of my labia, a search for the opening they concealed. Gideon lowered his head onto my shoulder. His arm came out from between us and his hips gave a gentle but firm push as, for the first time in my life, I entered the timeless dance of love.

Isn't this supposed to hurt? flashed through my mind as he slid deeper and deeper into me. Then I remembered that I'd lost my hymen as a little girl; there was no reason for pain. Instead, it felt so amazing that I began to weep tears of joy.

They didn't last long. His loving, patient foreplay had already left me on the brink of orgasm. As it grew closer and stronger, I lifted my legs up around his waist and pulled him in deeper, trying to rock my hips to match his rhythm. My hands swept back and forth along his back, my cries growing louder and louder.

And, just like that, I had my first.

I had thought I knew about orgasms.

I hadn't.

It flowed like liquid fire from breasts and belly. It grew and grew, matched only by my cries. It was the most amazing, awesome feeling.

Through it, Gideon continued to thrust into me. Looking up, I could see his eyes were closed, but there was a smile on his lips. I pulled his head down, ground my lips into his.

And still my orgasm continued.

Gideon paused, gave a low growl. His body went rigid and I could feel his cock pulsing within me. My heart soared at the pleasure of having pleased him - pleased him as a woman, for such I certainly was now.

In a minute, Gideon lowered himself more onto me, panting deeply. He still didn't feel heavy. I felt - I don't know - protected? cherished? It felt good, in any case.

Slowly coming down from my orgasm, I felt a hand in mine. Turning my head and opening my eyes, I could see Claire had stretched out her hand to hold mine. The flush on her face spoke clearly that she'd been there, too. Her blue eyes gleamed with happiness and, I realized to my delight, with welcome.

There was a happy smile on her face as she looked at me. Silently, she blew me a kiss, squeezed my hand and then closed her eyes, relaxed, slept.

My tears returned again, but gentle, happy.

I fell asleep holding her hand, safe in Gideon's arms.

Not, I smiled to myself as I drifted under, not for the last time.