

## 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, donchathink?"

"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. Stel 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 Caliope 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 offworlders 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 Stel'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 gen-



uinely 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.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” 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.”