



Reluctant Press presents:

Making of Melissa

Philippa Peters



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HARLEY SPINN

A 'NEW WOMAN' E-BOOK

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THE MAKING OF MELISSA

by Philippa Peters

I. OUT IN THE COLD

“Help her to sit up,” said a feminine voice and I felt myself jerked upright.

“Is she all right?” asked another anxious woman’s voice.

“She must have been a bad one,” said a third fearfully. “They’ve given her the mind wipe.”

No, said a cool voice somewhere inside my aching head, there is no such thing as a psyche probe or a mind wipe unless we want to produce a total idiot and what would be the point of that? If that was necessary, we would just kill you. What we do is more like a mind-stun. Your personal memories of who you are have been locked away but they will all come back. When someone says “mind wipe,” you’ll hear me in your head telling you all this and you’ll know that you are sane.

“She’s a pretty one,” said the first voice. “They’re going to love a little, blonde cutie like her where we are going.”

‘She.’ Who was that, I wondered, as my head seemed to be echoing with waves of sound. I could hear rotors turning and air stabilizers. There was the hum of a comconsole and a recorded male voice giving air temperatures in Coldhaven. I knew that place. Coldhaven was on the Northern Continent. It was settled almost entirely by male prisoners dumped on the planet over long periods of time when dumping was a way of getting rid of political prisoners and rebels from the ‘civilized’ worlds.

It seemed like they were talking about me. I was leaning against someone else’s shoulder, a flowery fragrance stirring in my nostrils. I felt soft hands on my bare arms, steadying me as the thopter—I don’t know why but I knew it was a three-engined Brennan 42 Stretch model—corrected its flight path. I felt the subtle power shift and noted the change in engine pitch that indicated it was going into a landing glide.

I was drifting from topic to topic. I tried to focus. I was on a thopter. I was leaning against a woman. I *was* a woman.

No, that was wrong. I wasn't a woman. I knew that. I was... I was... The words wouldn't come. I knew who I was. I was... I panicked. My name wouldn't come to my mind. I knew what it was. It was right there. I tried to remember and in doing so, I must have contorted because my companions noticed.

"She's coming round," said a voice and suddenly I felt a straw between my lips.

"Drink," said another. "It will make you feel better."

So I drank. The cool, orange taste was wonderful. I sat up straight and managed to open my eyes against the brightness flooding into them.

"Wh-where am I?" I gasped as, slowly, the dark figures against the white wall began to coalesce into a line of women sitting against the windowless fuselage of the Brennan. Must be a freight hauler, I guessed.

"At the end of the line, honey," said a woman opposite me, her long, dark hair twisted into braids. There was a smile on her beautifully madeup face; the metal rings cascading from her ears jingled as she moved her head.

A feminine hand with long, pink fingernails put the straw again to my lips. "Don't listen to Abigail," said the red-haired woman beside me. "Liffey has over twenty thousand living in the town alone and a hundred thousand up and down the valley. The rail to Coldhaven is two-thirds built and then the place will boom even more."

"And then we'll be moved on to some even worse cesspit," said the brunette Abigail sourly.

"If you keep up that attitude, Abby," said a blonde girl on the other side of me, "you certainly will. If you attack another guard, it's going to be a mind wipe for you as well." She reached over and patted my hand. Mine was just like hers, with red-tipped, femininely-shaped nails. Bracelets slid down my bare arm. "Sorry, Melissa. I wasn't trying to say anything bad about you, dear."

Below my hands were my bare knees, in stockings and there was the hem of a short, black skirt across my thighs. A pink sweater ballooned in front of me unmistakably in two mounds. Panic wasn't the word for the emotion that gripped me. I was a *woman*. But I wasn't! Hysteria threatened to overcome me as I moved. My stockinged legs moved as I ordered them to. I saw the shiny, black, high-heeled shoes I was wearing.

"We're landing," said another girl nervously from the front of the line of women. She was in a short skirt like I was. I felt that it was wrong, somehow, to be in such a skirt, showing off my shapely legs the way she was doing. She should be in a long dress and have masses of ringlets and so should I. That would have been right.

The back thrusters cut in and the pilot made a delicate landing.

The front hatches opened and a man in a blue flight suit said, "All right, you ladies. Time to leave the nest and meet your new boyfriends. The right column first."

The nervous girl stood up and when she passed the taller man, she kissed him anxiously on the mouth. He smiled at her and felt her rear as he helped her over the step and

out of the cargo hold. Each of the girls who followed did the same thing. Abigail tried to just kiss his cheek but the man pulled her back effortlessly, put her over his knee, exposing her red silk panties and spanked her hard until she whimpered. Then he stood her up and proceeded to kiss her longer than he had all the other girls.

"You I will be over to finish off," the man said hoarsely, holding Abigail and stroking her boobs. "I need a lot of comforting after this flight."

Comforting. That word triggered something in me. We were comfort girls. Once, Coldhaven had had no women and rebellions were ongoing and production was always fouled up. Then comfort women were brought in. Many thousands of workers, no, prisoners, were living in Coldhaven and the adjoining camps. No, worker and prisoner used to mean the same thing on the northern continent.

Now the camps had spread even further but they weren't camps any more. They were towns. And towns meant women for the workers. The first women on any frontier, came that cool, lecturing voice again, were always some version of comfort girls. Many even found love on the frontier and stayed, but I was not to do that.

I followed the girl ahead of me, feeling that I had long hair as well and earrings like her. I don't know why but I could walk in the high heels. I knew that I could kill the arrogant guard who waited for me to kiss him. I could see he was vulnerable in at least seven ways. How I knew that I couldn't think. That is, I couldn't analyze. I desperately wanted to stop for a moment and think my way through the predicament I was in but the crewman was ahead of me, smiling, watching me as I edged nervously towards him.

The man kissed me as I wavered. His lips were rather firm and it wasn't at all unpleasant. In fact, I rather liked it as he put his arms about me and pulled my breasts against him.

"Mmm," he said, as I clung to him, and he reluctantly let me go. "Now you're the cutest of them all, Melissa. You, I am definitely going to visit."

I was shaking inside as I let go of him and was helped onto the ramp that led to a glassy reception area. The other girls were awaiting me and the last few women to leave the freight hauler. I don't know why but the wobble of my breasts and the teetering on my heels seemed quite natural for me. But my mind was telling me that this wasn't me. I wasn't a woman. I was... I was someone with a male name I couldn't remember.

The crewman came at the end, his arm about a nervous looking brunette. He patted her on the rear and let her scurry into the group.

"Joleen," said a tall man with a clipboard, checking off a name.

"Put me down for Abigail and Melissa," said the crewman as I shivered with fright and looked at the blank or frightened faces of the women about me. "You should start with them, Code."

The tall man laughed in a deep baritone. "Not me, Jago," he said. "I don't need a girl with a little extra. I prefer a real girl like the ones back in Coldhaven."

There are no real girls over the age of ten in the Northern Continent, said my inner cool voice. She sounded like a blonde ice maiden. Every one, the voice went on, is produced either here at Lannan or in our new facility at Coldhaven. So this much you know. Every woman on the

Northern Continent will be an ally of yours if you get into trouble. Every one of them is just like you.

II. COMFORT GIRLS

The girls took purses from a trolley and followed the man through the terminal. I took the last one, a small, pink bag that fell from my shoulder, and minced after the others. My mind was in turmoil as we were walked past gangs of men who stopped whatever they were doing to gawk at us.

“Where are you going?” one man called as the men’s voices came as a quiet buzz. I think they were discussing us and our merits as we went through the passageways to an electronic door into chilly air, then into a bus marked as an airport transporter.

“Grother’s Inn,” replied a man who walked behind me, a goading stick in his hand. “Come and see us on your next shift off.”

“Count on it,” said another man, grinning, while his companion shook his head. I watched how the other girls walked, the sway in their hips, and found that I was doing the same. My heels just naturally took short steps and came down in a line, causing me to wiggle a little. I climbed on the bus, past a grinning driver, and there was the driving mirror in front of me.

A pretty girl, with blonde hair curled up above her shoulders, was watching me warily. Her pink top revealed slender, bare arms and a thick necklace like the one I was wearing, matched by the pendants at her ears. It took me a moment to realize that the girl was me. I was numb as I looked at the girl’s face, her dark red, slightly smeared lipstick, her expertly madeup eyes and her bouncy platinum blonde hair. No, this wasn’t me. It couldn’t be. I was what’s-his-name, I thought, as panic returned.

“Move on,” said the woman behind me. “So Jago mused up your lipstick. Don’t kiss him so long in future. You don’t have to enjoy kissing men.”

The blonde girl jerked as the woman behind me pushed me. I went down the aisle of the bus and sat in an empty seat. She followed me and sat beside me. “I’m Lolita,” she said, her ample hips pushing against mine, her stockings touching mine. I almost instantly recoiled from her and she smiled at me. “Well, that seems to settle one thing, doesn’t it? They didn’t send you up here because you still like girls too much.”

I didn’t understand her and it must have shown in my face. Lolita frowned, her thin, pencilled eyebrows drawing together most prettily. “How much do you recall?” she asked me. “Do you still know the world you were born on?”

I did know that. Anyone knows that. It was, it was, some place I couldn’t remember. I suddenly felt lonely and abandoned. I didn’t know anything further back than that thopter ride, I thought in a panic. Lolita took my hand in hers, holding hard to it as I tried to resist.

“They’ve given it to you bad,” she whispered. “You must have been some bad dude back at the training center for them to do this to you. But hold on. We’re all trying to do that. I’m originally from Haggan, a nothing little town out on the Malliver Rim World. I was six-four and two-fifty. So they made me a sergeant in the militia and sent me out to fight the rebels. It was my bad luck that the rebels won and I ended up with a year in

prison camp. Then they dumped us all and I tried to play the gentle giant. I ended up as Lolita, five feet five and one-ten, with a figure my sister would have died for. You're the same. Haven't you noticed how all the men are so much bigger than us girls? They do that specifically to us when they start us on nanotech transformations."

Nanotech transformation. That brought a cascade of memories into my mind. I heard someone saying, "Brace yourself. You're about to cascade." Instantly, I knew that a cascade was a flood of memories being released. I heard someone saying that it all began over two centuries before with a secret program in an out-of-the-way planet far distant from Nebula Prime. The world, Carmichael, had been selected because it was so far out of the way that it was the next best thing to a prison planet. Many worlds dumped or exiled, as they called it politely, their unrepentant war and criminal prisoners on habitable worlds. There, other original colonists couldn't object with force against stronger worlds. After being dumped on, inevitably the original colonists found themselves descending into the role of gaolers.

The secret program to produce perfect spies and assassins had an almost limitless number of prisoners to play with and the Carmichael scientists, long trained in one discipline, began to solve problems that had seemed insoluble. One such was how to transform a man into a reasonable, undetectable facsimile of a woman.

There was so much more but we were speeding through the town, its streets lined with stores and saloons. It was a typical male town, I knew, from the knowledge base that I could now dip into. We were driven right up to a modern inn with a long archway through which our bus passed. Ahead of us, another bus was parked and several grey-uniformed men were unloading 'our' luggage. I wondered if I had anything there to tell me who I was.

We were assisted off the bus by the driver who smiled and stared into our faces as if he was determined to remember us. We followed the tall man into the long hallway of the inn and into what must have been a dining room. It was very pleasant, the tables and booths surrounded by plants. The walls were adorned with paintings, several of them partial nudes of women.

We all sat where we could, me beside Lolita, as I recalled how Barnett Lannan, a renowned surgeon and scientist, had combined surgery and nanotech stimulation to make a perfect double of himself. That had produced a hundredfold investment in the technologies, no, the sciences, being advanced on Carmichael. Its economic base had, in consequence, bloomed in many directions. I was thinking or streaming so hard that I barely noticed the dark-suited man who came and stood in the center of the room until he began to speak.

"I'm Ren Grother," said a man who came and took the list from the tall man's hands. "You've met Jullion, my head of security, and where you are is Grother's Inn in Liffey on Northern. Most of you know why you are here and why you are assigned to the blue wing here and not the pink. I don't have to tell you what you have to do to graduate to the pink. Each of you has incurred quite a debt to the Protectorate, a debt I have assumed, which you must pay back to me. Yes, we do follow the custom of bridal auctions here; any of you, even in the condition you are currently in, could become a bride if you can find a man willing to pay off your price.

“My wife, Rosemary,” he indicated a blonde, very pregnant woman who had just come in and was standing in the doorway of the hallway we had come from, “has all your individual records and keeps the tally of the monies you earn. She will discuss with each of you in turn the rates at which you wish to pay off your debts. I hope you will all find this a pleasant place to stay. I have only had to sell the contracts of five,” he raised his eyebrows to his blonde, smiling wife, who indicated a different number with her fingers, “seven girls who would not cooperate with us.

“Now, this evening, we shall have a welcoming dance for you all with some of our most distinguished patrons. Tea will be served in your rooms to give you all time to make yourselves as lovely as possible. Rosemary has taught me always to allow extra time for you all to get ready to show yourself at your very best to our eager patrons.” He smiled fondly at his wife, who smiled just as lovingly back at him. He went then across to the door and put his arm about his wife, smiling down at her as she lifted her pretty face and was rewarded with a kiss.

I was so busy watching that byplay, I almost missed my name being called. “Melissa,” said Jullion, smiling as he looked at a notation on his list. “You seemed to have impressed one of the freighter crewmen. His tryst with you has been set for two o’clock, after the trysts with the Council members have been completed. Your room is two hundred and six.” He nodded at the door. As I had seen Joleen and Abigail do, along with several others, I went to the door.

A figure in a long, grey dress stepped before me and led me towards the right staircase. She had to lift her skirts and step most daintily on the steps, wobbling all the way, as if she was unused to moving in heels. Her figure was very straight, her hands squarish. Her hair was long, parted down the center, held behind her ears with a barette. She was blushing, her makeup heavy and inexpert. She wouldn’t look at me as if she was in some way embarrassed at her looks.

“In here, Miss,” she said in a squeaky falsetto that gave the game away. She was not a girl at all. She was a boy.

The dress swished most provocatively as my maid—I learned from Lolita later that that was his designation—bustled over to the windows that had been airing out the room, and closed them. Pink suitcases were on the bed; the maid opened them and sighed at the pretty lingerie that was revealed. Her, I am going to refer to him as a girl since that is what Natalie preferred. Her hands shook as she put panties into one of the drawers. I flipped open a garment case and long dresses shook free.

Natalie squeaked that it was her task, please, and so I let ‘her’ hang up dresses and skirts in the walk-in closet. All were clearly intended for me but I couldn’t think when I had ever acquired such feminine finery. The rooms were beautiful, modern and decorated with paintings and fittings, including huge mirrors, one even over the canopied bed.

I had a bathroom all to myself and a reception room with a table and dining area as well as a couch and a huge comconsole, which I soon found out was quite restricted. But I knew how to get around that. I don’t know *how* I knew how to do that, but I did. I would have to use that knowledge sometime.

Natalie ran a bath for me and put in enough fragrant salts to have me encrusted. "Not so much," I said, taking her arm, feeling the male muscle in her bicep, to stop her from adding even more.

She flushed, turned away from me and handed me the springy wooden cane that hung from her belt. Then she bent over and lifted her skirts over her back, exposing the garter belt, black stockings and black panties that she wore. I gathered that I was supposed to beat her for her error with the bath salts.

I hesitated and she looked at me, scarlet-faced. "Please, miss," she whispered. "They are watching. Two will be enough."

So I slapped her twice with the cane and she thanked me. She also curtsied clumsily to me as she put down her grey skirts and scurried off to get me my tea, she said.

Why not take a bath? I thought. It was what women were always doing, I thought, as I examined the image that was me in the mirror. I was gorgeous to my own eyes. I had a pert nose and small, rounded chin. My eyebrows, after I removed my makeup, were thin and blonde, almost invisible on my face. I don't know how I knew how to remove my makeup and where to put my false eyelashes, but I did know it as if I had done it before.

I removed my pink top and put it in the clothes hamper. My breasts were hard and firm, the nipples large and rounded. I stroked them and found myself feeling very strange between my legs. I was hurting there. I took off my little skirt, then the long stockings that came right up to my panties before being attached to a tiny garter belt. I had lovely legs.

I shuddered as the stockings slid down them. My derriere was as rounded and soft as my thighs and when I slipped off my panties, I had some sort of covering for my most private parts. It gripped me tightly and was very hard to get off. The pain when I got it to the top of my thighs was incredible. I cried out loud as I discovered that what I had felt all along was true. I had a penis and testicles beneath the gaff. I was indeed a man, just as my mind was telling me.

I must have stood there for five minutes, gasping from the pain and feeling awful about myself. I looked at the girl in the mirror; she *couldn't* be a girl, not with what she had between her legs. I couldn't see the joke in it at all and I began to replay all the things that had been said to me since I had become aware of myself.

I heard the outer door to my apartment, for that was what it was, hiss as someone entered. I thought it would be Natalie with the tea and so I hopped into the bath, covering my aching parts with a flannel. I didn't care if she saw my breasts. At least they went with the rest of me, my hair, my figure, my clothes.

The bathroom door was ajar and Lolita pushed in, clad in a long negligee, her womanly breasts quite exposed in what she was wearing. "You're quick," she said with a smile. "Did you get your, ahem, your maid, to do this for you?"

I got down a little more in the bath, realizing how my breasts were exposed to this other, this other what? I wondered. What had that voice in my mind said? *All the girls are like you.*

“Yes, Natalie ran a bath for me,” I said and related the little incident with the cane, which only made Lolita shake her head. “What is she, that Natalie?” I asked in bewilderment. “Whatever are boys doing in a place like this?”

“She’s not going to be a boy for long,” giggled Lolita. “Nor my Jennifer, either, but she’s much older than yours. Imagine what it’s like out there in the countryside with no feminine comfort at all. Stands to reason that the weak are going to be preyed upon. My Jennifer was a company clerk. She’d never done a manual job in her life and she was dumped here with men who’ve been here for years. They knew what they wanted from Jennifer and they got it. The military provosts stamp it out when they can and bring the victims to places like this. They’re made to wear women’s clothes and do women’s tasks. If they do well, they get transformed and shipped back as comfort girls, but not like us in the blue wing. They go straight to the pink wing.”

“Blue wing?” I asked with a sense of dread. I think I had worked it out but I trembled as Lolita confirmed what I had already guessed.

“Blue for a little boy,” she said, standing and easing aside her negligee and slipping down her panties to show me that she had a penis to match my own. “It’s their way of humiliating us, the troublemakers, the ones who stand up to them making us into girls. I’m one of the ones who’s still fighting back. I know my entire unit has disappeared as Mimi, Carmen or Fifi, all perfect little girls, but I tried to escape the surgical ward and look what they did to me. They didn’t operate and they sent me here.”

“Why?” I asked. I was going to have to find out as well who ‘they’ were and soon.

“Did you like kissing that Jago on the thopter?” she asked, standing there, hands on her wide hips, her penis uncovered. I flushed and she grinned. “I did, too.” She frowned and went on seriously. “But I can’t like it, can I, or I am never going to get back home.”

“You left someone behind? A wife?” I asked, not knowing why I thought of that then, along with the vision of an incredibly beautiful girl, her elfin face smiling at me as I bent to kiss her. Bent to kiss her! I must have been a man!

“No,” said Lolita. “Not that. I was promised a pension, though, and a land grant when I enlisted. I don’t care who the government is now. I want my farm and my money. I want to say who I am and what I am. It’s what we fought for.”

“It’s the same for everyone else?” I asked thinking how scared the women I saw earlier had seemed. Only Abigail had seemed as rebellious as this Lolita.

Lolita shook her long, auburn hair. She wrapped her negligee about herself and sat on the end of the bath. “Once they were,” she said. “I knew Lisbeth when she sabotaged a whole batch of medshells at that place they call Lannan. She had to do a spell as comfort girl to the techs who had to re-construct what she damaged. That’s why she didn’t finish the transformation. Now look at her. She was crying and begging that Rosemary, the boss’s wife, to let her go over to the pink, promising she’d pay back every penny. That effing Rosemary said that she was sorry but she knew that Lisbeth had the highest to pay-back of anyone in the current batch, save for Melissa. So, tell me, girl, what was it that you did?”

I couldn't remember. I couldn't remember why I was in the north. I didn't know why I was partly a girl. If it was something to do with being the perfect spy or assassin, I would have understood. But what could a spy be doing out in a backwater like the place to which I had been consigned? I shuddered, even though my scented bathwater was still very warm. I had to find a way out of there but I remembered what Natalie had said in her falsetto whisper.

So I just listened to Lolita rant on about all the 'crimes' others had committed to be sent north until Natalie and Jennifer arrived with tea for us, which they set up in my reception area. They served us like the ladies we appeared to be, with curtsseys and blushes. They did it quickly. Lolita rewarded them by taking them into my bathroom and redoing their makeup with my false eyelashes so that each they looking somewhat pleased with themselves, and definitely a lot more female.

III. AN EVENING AT GROTHOR'S INN

I spent a lot of time doing my makeup under the occasional supervision of Janette or Serena, the beauticians assigned to our floor. Serena helped me to put my hair up; she pinned it for me, twisting in a pale blue ribbon and making sure that I was wearing pale blue stones in my pendant earrings.

She was delighted that I seemed to know just what I was doing. I could have declared that I didn't. That would have been true. But my hands did. They seemed to know how to line the inside of my eyes. They knew how to attach my eyelashes and how to shade my eyes so that it looked that my lashes and lids were one.

I wore a gown of bronze that clung to my figure and exposed my breasts, hardly kept in place by the tiny straps at my shoulders.

Jullion himself came for me and escorted me to the ballroom. I flowed down the staircase on his arm. I'm not sure how I did it, but it seemed that I must have done it before. I *liked* doing it, feeling the thrill of being on a strong man's arm, knowing that I could in one second have him down and under my killing thumb if I wanted to. It was a heady thought as I was applauded by many smiling men who crowded about me, telling me how delightful I was. It was Jullion who decided that the High Councillor of Liffey, Morgan Hearn, should have the first dance with me.

It was a quickstep. I didn't know that I could dance a quickstep. I didn't know that I could dance a quickstep backwards as a woman should. I could and did on my four-inch heels while Morgan Hearn told me what a wonderful dancer I was and that he wanted the first slow dance with me as well.

As if in response to his request, the automusicon switched to a slow, dreamy waltz and a smiling Morgan Hearn took me in his arms, ignoring the other councillors who were eager to dance with me. "I've always admired you girls with a little extra," he murmured to me as if he was paying me a compliment. "For the longest time, girls like you were the only ones we had access to in the Liffey. I was only eighteen and I fell in love with the, well, with what I thought was the first woman I ever made love to. Martella was her name and she taught me how to love a woman. That is, how to love a woman like her. I was so

jealous of Denny Gurrell when he paid a bride price for her and took her off to Slay River as his wife."

Morgan smiled down at me as he shook his head ruefully. "That's how it was then," he shook his head again. "I know they started a new surgery for the girls we had back then, those that were married, that is, but most wouldn't have it. Mose Rennagan told me that his Claudia was perfect as she was and he didn't want any Lannan surgeon messing with her. Had four children as well. Mose said they tubed them all, two of hers and two of his, but how they did that, I don't know."

I knew. I could hear my cool inner voice telling me of the harvesting and purchasing of ova from women across the galaxy. Carmichael traded nanobodies for them with many labs across the Nebula and Rim Worlds. A woman like Rosemary could not become pregnant naturally but she could be impregnated by the doctors from Lannan with an ovum fertilized by her husband. Probably, her doctors would deliver her child by caesarean section and she would think herself the true mother of the infant that had been nourished and grown in her by such novel methods as the Lannan researchers provided.

I had a sudden insight that most of the doctors engaged in that work were women. But Carmichael frowned on its women ever learning anything of the sciences. Only now was that taboo breaking down. Then it came to me who those doctors must be and what they must have been before they became baby doctors and mothers themselves. I recalled seeing five or six of them on a ward, suckling their babies, their husbands so proud of them as they relaxed in their beautiful negligees, laughing at the babies clinging to them with their mouths as other very young, blushing and smiling nurses fussed over them. I could see a slender, blonde woman turning to smile at me and saying that she would be glad to get them all back to work but wasn't it every woman's right to have her child by as natural means as she possibly could, "just like you."

I shivered at that thought. I couldn't imagine what it meant. Morgan was instantly solicitous. He hugged me to him and breathed in my perfume. "Mmm," he sighed. "You girls always smell so beautifully female. I could hold you like this and dance with you all night."

I wouldn't have minded. It was strange how I felt in a man's arms, dancing with him. It was if I had done it many times before in my life. I liked the feel of my dress against my legs, restricting my movements, then swirling out airily to bring light, cool air to my stockings. I expertly pirouetted on my impossible heels and smiled prettily, with a curtsy, as I left Morgan. I was claimed by many other men who held me and told me how lovely I was and how they would tryst with me just as soon as I became available.

Once or twice, I glanced at the other girls; they were smiling as much as I was. The nervous girls, like Joleen and Stephanie, were not so nervous any more as they swirled about the floor in colorful gowns. Lolita wasn't dancing. She had her arm draped about the waist of a young man who looked like a woodchopper or something. His muscles fairly bulged out of the dark shirt he was wearing. The music changed to a quick beat. As I was twirled by my partner, I saw Lolita gyrate her hips wildly as her man put his hands on them and moved with her in unison to the floor. She looked up in delight and he kissed her. They danced together, his leg inside hers, and kissed at the same time. Partway

through the dance, they danced right out of the dancehall; he picked her up as she giggled and made eyes at him. He carried her easily up the staircase and they disappeared.

“Well, I hope you don’t expect such gymnastics from me,” said Morgan Hearn as he claimed me for a slow waltz. “I may not look it but I am seventy years old.”

In the past, that would have been ancient but with modern medicine, seventy was nothing. I was older than that. It was quite a jolt to realize that. I was over seventy years old. It had no meaning in regard to looks or to how active a person was. I could expect, because of the nanobodies and drugs in me, to live healthily all of my life until I ‘crashed’ somewhere beyond a hundred and thirty, if I was as normal as everyone else.

At the end of the dance, in response to a signal that I didn’t see or hear, Morgan put his arm about my waist and walked me from the floor to the staircase. We joined a long line of all the girls, each clinging to a man, being walked up the staircase. I heard Abigail giggling as she raised the front on her white dress and flowed up the stairs, her beau almost running up the steps after her. She seemed in a hurry to get him to her bedroom.

Our high heels clicked on the inlaid floors of the passage and Morgan steered me right into my own room. As I expected, as soon as we were inside the door, he took me in his arms and kissed me. He put his hands on my rounded posterior and pulled me into him, all the time his mouth and tongue tasting my lipstick while he made little sounds of pleasure. I liked kissing him as well. I liked it when he gently slipped my straps over my shoulders and he buried his rough face in my neck and chest.

He hugged and kissed me as if I was a woman and I responded to him as if I was. I could feel the fire in my gaff and wished that I was a pink girl and not a blue one. Then, I would be able to requite his love and give him the comfort that he came to a girl like me for. I seemed to be hearing a lecture in my head on what a comfort girl was and what she had to do for her man, her very short-term husband, as some called the male partner. But I couldn’t do what a comfort girl could do, could I? I was a man and he knew that. A few passionate kisses I didn’t mind. My brain seemed to think that it was all right for me to enjoy them. In fact, it suggested how I could increase my own pleasure by opening my lips to him and drawing him in.

As I expected, that made him even more ardent and he hugged me even more tightly. I felt my nipples press against my bra and dress and against him. Wow, was that ever nice! He freed the clasps of my dress; it floated to the floor and I was before him in my bra and matching dark blue panties and garter belt.

Morgan slipped my bra off me. He let his hands begin to caress the mounds on my chest which betrayed me completely because I felt intense pleasure at his caresses and the thing beneath my panties was reacting as if it was trying to get out.

He ran his hands down over my hips and stroked my legs and my pleasure doubled. I couldn’t stand, literally. I was aching too much. “To bed,” Morgan whispered, suddenly bending and swinging me up into his arms, his hands caressing my stockings and suspenders as he carried me to my bed.

“I’m sorry,” Morgan said. He began tearing off his clothes as I lay back on the soft, fluffy quilt, the canopy wavering above me as his exertions made it all move. “I know I should let you take off all your makeup, but I can’t wait a second longer to have you.”

To have me? How could he have me? I was a man. So was he. I know because I could see his erection now. I could feel his manhood against me and suddenly I thought of what Lolita had said about the 'maids.' He descended on me and his hands began to stroke my rear end.

"No!" I gasped as he released my garter belt and there were only my panties and gaff between him and me. He pushed between my legs and began to kiss me again and fondle my breasts. His hard manhood pressed firmly against my panties. He pressed down on my necklace as he kissed and kissed me. His hands seemed to be everywhere, overwhelming my mind with thrilling and wonderful sensations.

Morgan tugged on my panties and I could feel his smile on my lips as I pulled back at them. They were too flimsy and he had them away from me in no time. The gaff and what was beneath it did not slow him at all. I could have killed him as I knew so well how to do. I *should* have killed him for what he did to me but, after all, what Morgan wanted to do was to make love to me as if I was a woman. He wanted to please me as if I was a woman. He said so. He murmured how beautiful a girl I was as he stroked me and assisted the removal of the pain I had felt. Then, he penetrated me.

I was struggling and wiggling under him when he fitted himself into me. I could feel him stopping to lubricate my entrance so that he could push deeply into me. I don't think I had ever experienced that before. I was laying on my back like a woman and Morgan Hearn, High Councillor of Liffey, was entering me, thrusting and thrusting, while I clung to him, my legs up in the air on either side of his waist. I felt nothing but pleasure as his mouth possessed and penetrated mine and he squeezed my nipples. I felt him come, massively, inside me. I put my arms about his neck and hung onto him as I wiggled my little rear end and that seemed to increase the pleasure he was feeling, never mind my own. Maybe I *had* done this with a man before.

Morgan collapsed on me eventually while I wanted more, my own little thing, at least in comparison to his, still hard and pressing into his abdomen. "Thank you," he murmured, kissing my face gently. He kissed my nose and my ears, my earrings somewhere swung up in my loosened hair. "So many girls make me wait. It has to be just so with them. But I just *had* to have you and it was every bit as good as I wanted it to be. You enjoyed it too, didn't you?"

I was surprised at the anxiety in his tone. "Yes, I loved it!" I said, stretching my feminine, little body beneath him. "I would like you to do it to me again."

I hadn't been going to say that. The words just tumbled out as if I was repeating a formula. I was appalled at myself but it did start Morgan Hearn kissing me again, which I loved. I felt a wiggle in his manhood and he began to nestle in again, slowly growing against my now sticky buttocks.

Morgan did me slowly and intensely. It seemed to last for hours and it was intensely pleasurable. At some point, he took hold of my little man and I exploded at his gentle touch. It was the most tremendously unexpected pleasure as he was still inside me. We rocked and wriggled together and he even let me briefly roll on top of him and ride him with my wiggly posterior.

I was so glad that I hadn't killed him. I didn't just like what he was doing to me, I *loved* it. It was something I was going to have to get my husband to do to me when I got back to our home. And suddenly, I had a picture of a man as tall as Morgan Hearn. But this man was much handsomer and he was leaning over me and smiling. Then he bent and kissed me. In my waking dream, I was kissing this very distinguished, handsome man and he was kissing me, evidently enjoying it very much.

Confused, I clung to High Councillor Morgan Hearn and he cuddled me to him, whispering sweet words about how lovely I was and how feminine my breasts and my legs and my backside were. He would be spending a lot of time with me in the future unless I told him to go away and did I know my minimum bride price? If not, he would find out, for if there was a bridal auction right now, he would buy me and marry me.

I know Morgan meant it all as a compliment. *How can I tell him*, I thought miserably, *that I just confirmed to myself that I am already married, and to a man.*

IV. THE SHE-MALE

It didn't bother the High Councillor that I had manhood between my legs. Morgan treated me as if I was a woman and I responded to him as if I was. As he told me what a wonderful lover I was, so I told him what a wonderful man he was. He seemed to grow even more amorous as I praised him for being such a man that any girl would want him as her lover. I got between the sheets with him and we explored each other's bodies. I was shameless as I induced him to rise again.

I had such crazy feelings after he had entered me. I could still feel him inside me and I felt as if he was making love to me constantly even when he was just laying, exhausted, beside me. I mounted him, my knees at his sides and lay my energized breasts on his chest. Within moments, he had my nipples in his mouth and he roused me again.

"Oh, my darling," Morgan sighed. "I am not a superman. Let me pleasure you another way." He used his mouth and he did, his hands stroking my soft-skinned legs so that I almost convulsed as he made me come and come. He told me I had a sweet clitoris, which was obviously not true. With the way he used his tongue, though, well, I was extremely pleased by my lover. I wondered how many trysts I could take in a day if I got such pleasure as this from each man I was to let have me.

The High Councillor was reluctant to leave me but the console messenger insisted that I had another appointment and so he had to go. Jullion was waiting in the hallway as Morgan left, pausing in the doorway to press me to him, in my skimpy negligee and low-cut panties. His hands caressed my soft, rounded rear as he pressed my naked breasts into him. I loved the firm way he kissed me and I clung to him as well, kissing him back as warmly as I could.

"Thank you for a wonderful evening," I murmured to him as Jullion coughed discreetly across the hall from us.

"No, thank *you*," whispered my lover. His hands squeezed and squeezed my rear as he kissed me again and again.

“High Councillor,” said Jullion firmly, moving towards us and Morgan let me go. He looked back several times as he staggered down the hallway. I gave him my feminine wave, my elbow tucked in with just my hand moving as I clutched the almost transparent, dark pink negligee about myself.

“Melissa,” said Jullion and I turned to look up at him. “What an interesting little shemale you are,” he went on, giving me a thin smile. “You not only look like a woman as you all do but you have the most womanly gestures as well. I can see why the High Councillor is so besotted right now. We must talk.” He slurred the word and smiled and I had the impression that he meant something else entirely. “You can earn many credits if you direct the pillow talk you have with our beloved leader. We might even make you exclusive to him. Or wouldn’t you like that?”

Jullion had come very close to me. He put out a hand and gently cupped my breast and I shuddered. My brain, however, registered the ridges and calluses on his fingers and along the side of his hand. He was six-six in height, at least, and very strong, sinewy, the worst kind to take down, a martial arts expert. My only defence was to make him think I was a simpering, little shemale, whatever that was, no threat at all to him.

It took no acting at all to let him know how much I liked him stroking me. He bent his head and kissed me and I hungrily held onto his lips with mine, thrills and chills going through me.

“You will have another tryst this morning,” he whispered. “Tell Natalie to bring breakfast for two at ten when we awaken.”

Then he let me go and strode away. When I turned, I found Natalie nervously waiting behind me to go into my room. She darted into my room and went immediately to the bedroom to change the sheets on the bed. She gathered up my soiled clothes and went into the bathroom to run a bath for me, with just the right amount of fragrant bath salts this time.

I bathed and let her see me naked. Natalie flushed at my manhood but it didn’t seem to surprise her at all. She dried and brushed my hair for me and suggested the braids I might have at the sides of my head, little golden pigtails with which I wore blue stone studs in my ears.

I didn’t gaff for Jago, my next tryst. I was too sore. Natalie had soothing creams for that and lubricants for my rear which she placed beside my bed after very delicately trying to explain to me how to use the new injector top. There was even a lubricant for my male lovers.

“Have you ever used those?” I asked Natalie as she helped me into a new, low-cut bra and matching, low-cut panties.

Natalie flushed and looked furtively at the console. “Yes, miss,” she said, her color deepening to scarlet.

“On whom?” I asked. I saw how distressed she was but I felt that I should know.

Natalie looked down at the floor. “There-there are men,” she whispered, “who like other men. It isn’t often but we can earn credits by taking them, though usually they don’t want to penetrate us as men do you. Oh, if I am only half as beautiful as you, miss, when I

can afford the first part of my change, I will be so happy. Three men in one night On your first night here! I hope *I* can be so lucky."

Natalie showed me where the cold drinks and snacks were kept, as the men often wanted such during or after their exertions. She poured me a glass of cold, Armandy life-water, that made me think of a most elegant woman in a dark suit and straight, knee-length skirt, when Jago came in.

He was startled to see the maid. Natalie couldn't help looking like a young man in a dress. It was what she was, after all, her jaw and nose very masculine which no amount of eye makeup, lip gloss and face powder could conceal. I asked her to pour Jago a drink and she trembled through it all. Jago made it worse by the look on his face as he watched her.



"You didn't have to be so cruel to her," I said after she left.

Jago came around the table and pulled me to my feet. "Her?" he asked, breathing in the 'Mountain Flowers' scent Natalie had liberally sprayed all over me. "She looked like a 'he' to me."

His mouth closed on mine before I could register my indignation for the boy who so much wanted to be doing this with a man like Jago while *I* was trying not to become addicted to kissing men. But Jago kissed me nicely, arousing lovely feelings in me. I was already in my nightdress and peignoir so it was easy for him to pick me up, as Morgan had done, and take me to bed.

I readied myself to pleasure another naked man in my bed. He was hard and tight-muscled and didn't want me to take off my nightie as he caressed me through the soft silk.

He rolled me over as I let him penetrate me, lubricating us both with cool oils that seemed to make him larger and fit into

me more tightly. He kept murmuring as he squeezed me tightly with his legs. He let me mount his huge erection. I rode him as he bucked and writhed beneath me. His hands pressed my silks and satins against my fevered skin as I lay on him and kissed his rock hard nipples.

Jago finally came and feverishly kissed and caressed me and I felt proud of my performance. I had brought two men to a climax in me. I must admit that I was feeling less and less like a man all the time. He rolled me over and touched a button on a post of the bed. The canopy slid back and I looked up at myself kissing and squirming, a look of ecstasy on my feminized face as I made love again to a man.

I finally realized that he was saying, "I'm going to get in *so* much trouble for this," as he loved me and rolled me again. I giggled as he came free. I took him in my hands and began to palp him again. If I was a 'shemale,' as Jullion had called me, I was also a wanton. Jago spun me over so that he was under me and I was laying on him. He entered me as I arched under the intense pleasure I felt as he kissed me, stroked my breasts and made my clit get hard under his touch. I was wiggling with pleasure as he came and then I did.

Then my world shattered as he whispered in my ear. "Does the name Willen Smit mean anything to you?"

V. MELISSA ACCOMPLISHES HER MISSION

I went almost catatonic on the bed as knowledge cascaded through me. I think I went stiff and cold; Jago started to cuddle me and draw the clothes of the bed around me as if to warm me. Of course *I was* Willen Smit. I was an investigator for Internal Security of the Nebula Kingdom. What a misnomer that was. I operated anywhere within the area dominated by the Nebula for the Kingdom, internally or externally. It made no difference where the place was or who ruled it.

I saw the well-groomed, dark-haired woman again in my mind and saw, in my mental picture, how her office changed in grandeur as she climbed in the bureaucracy of the Nebula Kingdom, her increasing status often the result of the work I did for her. Now I knew her as Lady Myra Colach, Duchess of Galloway, Minister of Security in the government of the Kingdom. She thought she was my boss. I knew that I was an independent contractor.

But there it became fuzzy. Lady Myra hadn't intended that I become a woman when she sent me to investigate nanotech transformations on Carmichael. She hadn't even known that the Kingdom had been involved, nor that the program had gotten away from her predecessor. Why shouldn't it have? Her own superior had been replaced by a nanotech transformed duplicate. Colach had rooted out even more in the Kingdom, thinking she was under attack from the Kingdom's arch-enemies and rivals, the Shelter Republics, and, specifically, Congreve.

I had been sent to Carmichael to work my way through the backwater planet's connection to the whole affair. Only Carmichael was no backwater and it was up to its ears, its security and intelligence agencies at least, in fomenting the coming war between the Kingdom and its allies and the Shelter Republics.

Details became remarkably fuzzy. I had become a woman because I was kidnapped by... No, that wasn't right. No, it was Stillwell. My task was Stillwell. I had to keep a promise to my old friend, Oliver. He was Willen's old friend, *my* old friend, on the planet of Westmore. I had promised to find his three brothers who had been part of a dump by the central government Stillwell's forces had fought to a standstill.

The background was fuzzy but I knew now why I was in Liffey and why I was a woman. Eddard Stillwell, one of Oliver's younger brothers, had been here at Grother's Inn. He had been a rebel and had fought against his transformation. Half done, so to speak, as I was, he had been in a draft of 'incorrigibles,' the troublemakers of several classes, and dumped again.

This time Eddard was a comfort girl on Northern. Grother wouldn't co-operate with finding 'her,' the girl that had been sent to him. He never would, said Coldhaven Security. If we wanted anything out of Grother, the only way was to go up the Liffey and ask him. Coldhaven Security said that Grother wouldn't answer. He always claimed he burned the records of his girls and their trysts so he couldn't answer even if he wanted to.

That is why I was being sent in, in another draft of incorrigibles, to the river valley and its major town, both named Liffey. But the idea of 'incorrigibles' being sent to the Liffey didn't seem to be true. My companions, save for Lolita and Abigail, could scarcely be called troublemakers. Even those two, like me, seemed to love being women. I remembered the men they had been with. I remembered the euphoria I felt as Jago, my second lover, possessed me.

I came awake and sat up suddenly, scaring him, I could tell. Jago put his arm about my slender waist and tried to pull me down in the bed. "Euphoria," I croaked. "There's a drug called 'Euphoria' that Lannan uses with its recalitrants." It not only made the recipient feel very good but it also made them very susceptible to suggestion, like being told what a lovable, beautiful woman you were, and how much you loved being kissed by handsome men. Euphoria addicts, it took a long time to create such, had almost no will power of their own. "You are feeding it to me and the other girls here." I punched Jago in the arm with my girlish, little fist.

"I didn't! I swear!" Jago said fearfully, trying to hold me to him, caressing my sides again.

"You took advantage of me," I said coldly, straddling him and sitting on his stomach. "You loaded me with Euphoria and didn't give me the code word until you had me. You were supposed to protect me, weren't you? Are you that hard up for sex here?"

"Yes," he gasped as his hands nervously stroked my thighs. "You are such a beautiful woman. I wanted you from the moment I saw you. I had to have you. It was so, so wonderful to make love to you. Oh, frigging heck, Lady, Lady Melissa, are you going to kill me?"

I sifted his words through my brain. "You were going to call me something else there, weren't you?" I asked, leaning over him and putting his hands on my breasts. Mmm, that felt *so* good, even it was just the drug making me enjoy his touches.

"I can't tell you, Lady, Lady Melissa," he said as he stroked me. I felt something hard pressing into my soft buttocks as he wriggled beneath me. "It's another cascade word.

You, you were the one who made me promise not to give it to you until we were on the way out.”

Just like me, I thought, as I lowered my head onto his shoulder and kissed his neck, then his face. Well, I was a comfort girl and Jago looked in need of some comfort. Besides, there were the telltales about my room. They would be watching me. They would expect me to succumb again and again to such a handsome man. They would expect me to be all girlish and shivery as I coaxed him to take me, to penetrate me again. I put on a very good show. Very soon I had Jago kissing and making love to each part of my body, telling him how much I loved it, groaning and arching, as he aroused my clit immensely before he mounted me and loved me, penetrating me and riding me as any woman would love her man to do. Jago also made sure that we ejaculated together as I frantically wiggled my rear for him as he kissed and kissed me, penetrating me so deeply that only a few of my squeaks and moans were put-ons.

I lay in his arms and he relaxed, still kissing and stroking me as if resting was just an interlude before more and more sensual lovemaking. My hair had come undone and was a golden cloud about my head as he stroked it, hard and masterful. I didn't want to get up but I had to. I had work to do, real work.

“All right, baby,” I said, getting up. He frowned as he tried to restrain me. “I'll check it out for you.”

I turned on the console and under the guise of confirming the weather pattern for the Liffey area and the readiness of the flights out the next day, I added my own special programs, courtesy of Nebula Internal Security. I didn't expect any whistles and bells and there weren't any.

I put on a soft music channel and did a sexy walk back to the bed while Jago's eyes goggled. “It helps me get into the mood, too,” I whispered and snuggled under a thin sheet against him. He had kicked it off and I was being swallowed into his kiss when the console chirped with its special signal. I knew that it had found the tape of me making it with Jago and had spliced it into our present activity. The only output from my bedroom now was the rerunning tape of me seducing our own, bemused security man.

“All right, lover,” I said, rolling from him; Jago was left panting and grasping at empty air. “The packages you brought?”

Jago didn't know he had packages. His eyes went wide as I ripped open the hems of his uniform and took out my special weapons. I put on my gold distorter earrings but didn't activate them yet and I looped the sheathed verawire about my wrist like a bangle. I ripped off the buttons of Jago's uniform and had explosives in one hand and the square incendiaries or smokers in the other. The long, springy verasword would cut a man's throat from two feet away. I had thrown one once, twenty-five years ago, through an arrogant Congreve. I hadn't thrown it hard but it went right through him and exited to stick in a column of dursteel in a Hordan Station bar. It had convinced the local satrap of the station to give the Nebula Kingdom an autonomous trading enclave which they still held.

The chronometer showed that Jago would have to leave in minutes. “Get your crew on ready,” I told him. “Use the priority you were given. You did have one?”

Jago was flushed as he slowly began to put on his underwear. The console was showing us making out, his head, well, his head between my legs, his enjoyment as obvious as my own. The clock on the tape indicated there was still thirty more minutes to run if I wanted it.

"You were the one who gave it to me," Jago said as I put the springy knife in the hem of the pillow on my bed. I moved it below the bed. No point having Natalie find it.

"I may come out of here on the run," I said. "If you don't get an all clear by four-twenty," I pointed at the chronometer. "You might as well run for it because Jullion will have killed me."

"You're going up against Code Jullion?" he asked fearfully. I nodded.

"I have to get him when he's unprepared," I said. "He's Grother's main line of defence, his only one really against an investigator like Willen Smit."

"He'll have cohorts," said Jago doubtfully.

I smiled and put on my pink negligee again. "Not in here," I said.

The look on his face was priceless. "You're going to bed Jullion?" he gasped. "Why?"

"Because he asked me," I said. I opened my door and kissed and kissed him, feeling his rising passion against my nearly naked body as I heard Natalie creeping down the hallway to tidy up.

"You're missing a pillow," she squeaked at me as I scented my newly bathed body again.

"Oh, it fell behind," I said casually and took the new pillow slip from her hand, 'finding' the missing one and changing it myself. The knife was still in place.

Jullion must have seen Jago leave. I was glad I was in five-inch heels along with my baby doll nightie set. He didn't have to bend so much nor did I have to reach so much to kiss each other. Natalie was goggling at us as she poured the wine again but I had her put them in the cooler. "We've have it later," I said to her with a smile of encouragement as she looked about, ready to assume the position for more punishment.

I held onto Jullion's hand as I led him to the bed. He was surprisingly gentle but I could sense the hunger in him as he kissed me. He sighed as he responded to the touch and feel of me, all softness where he was hard and lean and muscular.

"You're like a man in the desert who just found water," I giggled. Jullion lifted me like I was a little kitten and began to kiss my neck as I burrowed into him. No reason why I shouldn't pleasure myself with him as I had with the other men earlier. I was glad that I had lubricated myself earlier because, even though he was gentle, he also knew what he wanted. He was inside me in almost no time.

Jullion was so tall that he almost wrapped around me. I lay almost flat, my mouth on his and he was thrusting in me, my panties only partly down. My own tinier manhood was not exposed at all as he had me and, again, I didn't have to pretend that I was faking it. I had set the over-ride copying device to take the tell-tale feeds and store them. When I was ready, the watchers, if there were any of a man who was the head of Grother's security, would get an eyeful.

I had to take Jullion's hands and put them on my breasts to caress me and his thrusting grew in urgency as I kissed his fingers. I wrapped my legs about him and brought his hands to my rear and gyrated for him. He was kissing me and fondling me, coming in a rush like a young schoolboy.

"Ah," Code Jullion said, the last of many grunts and sighs, with my mouth caressing his neck. "If you must know, Miss Water of the Desert, you are the first woman like you I have ever had. Oh, I have had women in Coldhaven, but not one of the women they send up here to Grother. You, I think, I will see again. In fact, if you keep stroking me like that, and wiggling your pretty breasts on me like that, I am going to have to make that next time right now."

"Oh, yes, please," I giggled, snuggling up under him. "Again and again, please." I arched and stretched out, using my right hand to steer his smiling mouth onto my breast, even as I flicked the console switch to music. That meant that it started the taped program of Jullion having me in my bed for his first and last time. My left hand took the blade from the pillow.

Jullion was so good, he was rolling away in instinctive reaction as the blade flashed across his neck and dealt him the mortal cut. He even tried to grab at the blade but all that did was sever his fingers so the deathblow he aimed at me only covered me in blood. The puzzled look on his face as he died was something I sometimes wish I could forget. I have tried to rationalize that he was part of the rebel force in the last great rebellion on Carmichael. He was but he was only a soldier and he had never left Northern to join the forces of the plotters in the south. On the day I killed him, he had just been too good and had stood in the way of me, Willen Smit, completing my assignment.

I washed off the blood in the bathroom and collected my tools. I worked a little more on the console and cleared the electronics to Grother's room. Grother would tell me what I wanted to know or he would be dead as well. I put on a dark, long-sleeved sweater, long, stay-up stockings and black panties and a skirt. I didn't wear shoes.

It was silly to slip along passages that were so well lit in all black. One look at me and the alarm would be raised. But there was no alarm. I reached Grother's rooms without any incident. I could tell instantly which one was he in the bed. The other was restless and pregnant.

My verawire about his neck terrified Grother. He recognized it right away. He moved exactly as I indicated him, too. In a soft shuffle, in which I cut him several times and had to pause, we made the study where I made him sit before his console, me behind him, ready to lop off his head by pulling my loop tight. At such times I wished I was taller, as Willen Smit had been. But it was 'their' fault he was cut. They, whoever 'they' were, should have let us women be the same size we were when we were men.

"Code Jullion will kill you for this," he snarled.

"Only if, by some miracle, you know how to raise the dead," I said to him, pointing to the security keys Jullion had possessed, now on his control pad. "Don't faint," I said to him. Grother looked sick as he eyed the key set on his desk. "And don't sneeze or make any sudden moves or your head will be off as well."

"How...?" Grother asked fearfully.

"He likes pretty, little blonde girls, of certain measurements, movements and dress," I said. "I was prepared for him. He really didn't have a chance. *You* have a chance. You have information I need."

"No," Grother said and I could see that he wanted to shake his unkempt, black hair.

"You don't have much choice," I told him. "I only get this one chance to let you help me. Tomorrow, the new Lord Coldhaven will be commissioning a new Lord Liffey whose first task will be eliminating you." That didn't seem to faze him, despite the death at his neck. "And your wife and future descendants."

"Rosemary," Grother croaked as if I he was in pain and I knew that I had him.

"I need the records of everyone who has ever passed through this facility," I told him. "I need to know her original name, where she came from, how she was named by Lannan or Coldhaven or you and where she went to from here."

Grother paled. "I don't keep such information," he began. "I told them in Coldhaven. I couldn't give them to you, I told them, not even if you were Lady Caroline herself."

Lady Caroline. The shock I felt was almost palpable. I suddenly knew everything about myself. I was Lady Caroline Sutcliffe, the wife of the Lord Protector of Carmichael. I had recently foiled an attempted rebellion by Lady Helen McDonald, my co-wife. Between us all, we had five children with another waiting to be enlivened at Lannan Medical. I recalled it all, including Jacqueline Ivany's cool voice going over the instructions with me as I took advantage of the fact that I had been awakened early in my last nanotech transformation before the secondary and tertiary changes had taken place which would have left me a fully functioning woman with a vagina.

"I saw your wife," I said as sense returned to my head. I had so much information to process. I had to get back to my daughter who missed me so much. The few days I had allotted to this were already too much. My husband needed me as well. He needed me as a whole woman and not the 'shemale' I had become for this mission. I had to get back to them as quickly as I could.

"I saw the records Rosemary keeps on the monies paid and owed," I went on. "Maybe I should question her with my wire. The new Lord Liffey can start his traitors' gate display with three new heads."

He was in agony. "A girl like you wouldn't do that to her," he gasped. "You and my Rosemary, you are so alike."

"I have a penis," I said harshly.

"So does she," Grother said.

VI. EDDARD STILLWELL

The records lay there before me. To save his Rosemary, Grother would have given me anything. Once a high-ranking officer on Foreman, he had early on accepted his status as an exile and sought to build some kind of life on his new planet. He had founded many enterprises before the Inn fell into his hands. He kept meticulous records.

The colors pink and blue were used to indicate acceptance and newness or difficulties in accepting a feminine role in society. I hadn't realized before how expensive a full transformation was and how a full transformation required access to facilities that were already working at full steam. Fifty of the two hundred and seventy-five 'girls' at Liffey were on a waiting list for operations in Coldhaven. Thirty-five left just before being replaced by the new 'blue' draft I was in. There were fifteen or more establishments like Grother's Inn across Northern, not counting Coldhaven itself. There were also a number of smaller establishments, including a dozen in the Liffey River area.

I hadn't known that it was easier to do part transformations on an assembly line basis but that surgeons, surgical equipment, and more specialized nanobodies took time to produce. Then there were trainers as well, psychiatric as well as cosmeticians and teachers, though they were most often provided from within the eager ranks of the transformed. 'Girls' like Natalie weren't even counted in those numbers. They were on waiting lists to even be considered for first-stage transformations.

The only problem was that I couldn't find any note of Westmore, Stillwell, Eddard or his brothers in Grother's records. I searched through his past transactions, going back to the former owners, who brought in the first girls ten years before. Two thousand girls were profiled in his history files but none of them were from Westmore.

I was so absorbed in my search that the outer door opened before I could stop it and a woman pushed in, a very pregnant woman. "Renno, darling," she murmured sleepily. "He's wriggling all over the place. You have to call Doctor ..." Her voice broke off and her eyes went wide with horror as she saw her husband restrained in the chair I had placed him on with the wire about his neck.

I didn't react as quickly as she did. Her fright didn't stop her from attacking me and going immediately for the desk drawer in which I knew there was a loaded cutter-beam. It took all of my nimbleness to push her over to the sofa, staggering under her blows, which she didn't pull at all. Sometimes, I forgot how womanly weak I was.

"Rosemary! Rosemary!" Ren Grother called out in agony. If he had been free, I would never have been able to control the pair of them. She began to cry and scream at me so I had no choice but to get the gun for myself and point it at the pregnant Rosemary while I locked the door she had come through.

"Jullion will kill you," she snarled, her blonde hair ruffled all over her shoulders, face, and back. Her short red nightdress was matched by her panties and her painted toenails and fingernails. Rosemary had long, rounded, feminine legs and she wasn't averse to trying to kick me with them now that she had lost her high-heeled slippers.

"He's dead and your security is subverted," I said as she looked at me with hatred, the look softening to fright and concern when Rosemary looked at her husband. "Do you want him to live?" I asked, pointing at her husband.

"Melissa, isn't it?" Rosemary said with an anxious frown. "That pilot from Coldhaven who had to have you must have brought in weaponry."

"Good guess, but wrong," I lied, "as your tapes will show when you are in control of them again. Now, if you want your husband to live, you will show me how to access the records for Ansell Borbeck of the planet of Westmore." I gave her Suzie's original name as

a Westmore soldier. The image of the devastatingly beautiful girl crying as she looked at me came to mind. It was the subterfuge that I was to use, said Jackie's cool voice which I now knew so well. It was just the sort of thing that Willen Smit would plan for, Jackie said, smiling at me.

"There's no Ansell Borbeck in there," Rosemary said anxiously, glancing at her husband who was trying to tell her not to cooperate with me. She frowned at him. I went to Ren Grother and put my hand on the loop and a little drop of blood ran along the wire and dropped messily on his shirt.

Rosemary shrieked and started to cry. "Prove it," I said.

"I can't," Rosemary gasped, trembling now, putting her hands on her ample, distended abdomen. I imagined that the baby in there was moving industriously again, a baby she could not birth naturally. "How can you prove a negative? He was never sent here."

"But you knew the name," I said, guessing, "because you are from Westmore yourself?"

Rosemary hesitated and gave her husband a fearful glance. "Yes," she said.

I was looking at her data record and the notation that Rosemary was a corporal, whatever that was, in the militia on Foreman, found guilty of rebellion and sent into exile. Her name was listed as Roy Garth. She had been a comfort girl here only a year before she was put into the bridal auction where Grother had met her price of over five hundred thousand. I looked at a picture of her in a long, frilly pink dress; she clung to a proudly smiling Grother on the day of her auction and marriage.

I looked at Grother, shaking my blonde hair. "And you said you did not alter any of your records," I chided him. "This makes it difficult for me. But at least I can put this right. What was your original name?" I asked Rosemary, turning the console to her.

"Oh," she said and a faint smile appeared on her lips. "Oh, darling," Rosemary smiled tremulously at her husband, "you didn't have to give me your name. I was a lieutenant, anyway, and Borbeck was under my command. I tried to protect him, among others, from being separated from me. He was so pretty, as a woman, that is, and they took him into the special draft for the officers, we thought. Then I stopped being Lieutenant Eddard Stillwell."

"But you are the person I have come to find," I said quietly and watched the shock enter into her blue eyes again. "Oliver sent me to find you."

"Oliver," Rosemary gasped. "But he hates me. He would never. Oh, he wants my numbers, does he?" I remained silent. There was nothing I could say. I didn't know what she was talking about. "Has he found Davert and Herall then?" She saw the studied blank look on my feminized face and read it correctly. "My numbers are useless without theirs." Her little chin came up in determination. "I am not going back with you. I am Rosemary Grother now and married to a wonderful man. When little Roy arrives, I want to be his mother as I am Renno's wife."

"Renno's widow," I suggested calmly and Rosemary paled visibly.

"I'll give you the numbers," Rosemary said desperately. She took a stylus from beside the console and hurriedly wrote them down on pad there.

“Don’t give them up,” snarled Grother, swaying a little in the chair. “If you do, I’m a dead man and you’ll be returned to your brother.”

Without another thought, Rosemary ate the paper with the numbers. Her frightened eyes flickered from her husband to me. Then she winced and gripped the desk in front of her, fear in her eyes. “My love,” she whispered. “We must go.”

Grother looked at me with haunted eyes. “I must order a thopter for Coldhaven,” he pleaded with me. “When she is there, Rosemary can call back the numbers here and you can lop off my head.”

“No!” screamed Rosemary.

I pressed my comm device which alerted Jago. Then I signalled him to land in the Inn’s inner courtyard, something a military pilot could do. “My ride to Coldhaven leaves in fifteen minutes from the courtyard,” I told them both. Their eyes were looking at each other with fear and hope. I called Natalie and told her to meet me with my warm coat and high heels on the outside steps and that she should dress warmly as well.

“Get ready to go to hospital,” I told Rosemary. “You,” I told Grother. “You will announce to your security that you are transferring Rosemary, yourself and two others with nursing experience to Coldhaven and you expect to return as a father to a smoothly functioning facility.”

Ren Grother paled when I showed him my knife; he looked up at me in fear as he recognized, I am sure, what kind of assassin I was. I removed the wire from his neck and we three went into their bedroom where he removed a ready case and helped Rosemary get ready to depart.

They cooperated well. I really didn’t need the cutter beam or the knife to make them go out to the thopter. Rosemary was clearly in distress as we went. Natalie met me and it was a pleasure to get back into high heels and to have my coat to conceal my weapons.

“There’s, there’s a body in your room,” Natalie warbled, more baritone than soprano this time. She almost balked at the thopter with the looks she got from the crew as they assisted ‘her’ aboard. *Wait till they bring you back, Natalie, I thought. Just wait. They won’t let you get off without giving them many kisses.* I would see to that.

I didn’t tell Grother or Rosemary either about my trained eye and eidetic memory. I had followed what she had written in my mind, the letters from the Cyrillic alphabet, the Greek alphabet and the odd math symbols. I hoped that would be enough for Oliver Stillwell for I had no intention of ever telling him where his sister was now living.

VII. SCHOOLGIRL

I don’t know which was worse, to be a comfort girl in Liffey or to be a schoolgirl in Greening. In the Upper Academy, most of the girls were genetically born girls. Fourteen of them were not and I was the fifteenth. I think that there were some other girls in the lower classes who might have come from Lannan as well but Lady Lannan, Jacqueline Ivany, wasn’t letting me in on all her secrets. My husband, she said with a smile, she would tell if asked, but I wasn’t in power. I was merely Rohan’s wife. She knew how that would rankle me and it did, as if I was really a woman.

After recovering from the nanotech secondary transformation, I was once more a fully functioning wife to my adoring husband whose bed and attentions I no longer had to share with my co-wife, the late, unlamented Helen, or Lord John, as I constantly thought of 'her.' But being the only 'mother' left alive, I now had five children to rear and organize.

Oh, I had a massive household. Each child had a governess and 'Nanny' Margaret Hackerty to aid me but it was still very difficult. Helen had been the stay-at-home mother and the boys, Hamish in particular, had bonded with her. They dutifully called me Mummy and let me tuck them in and read to them at nights. They gave me affectionate kisses but they were shy, reserved children in the main and the changeover in maids and nannies also affected them.

It was almost a relief to travel on second honeymoons with Rohan, my lord and master, to every corner of the planet, combining government and social activities with our inevitable trysts as they were called up in the Liffey. I had insisted on two torrid days on the beach in my scandalous bikinis, bought in Nebula Prime, and sent to me as an ironic gift by Lady Myra Colach, who well knew who I was beneath my transformed skin.

Rohan had not been able to keep his hands off me, which is what I had intended. I lost count of the number of times he took me; if he was using some chemical means to maintain his abilities, I couldn't have cared less. I seemed to spend almost all of those days on the verge of orgasm into which I fell with a rapidity that shocked but delighted me. It was marvellous to be a woman and have so many quivering orgasms while my husband had just one. I carried those memories into the biosculpt that Jackie gave me, this time to become the twenty year old Melissa Sutcliffe, a 'distant' relative of the Lord Protector's family whose parents were going to become new administrators of the Greening industrial compounds pending the trial of Lord Greening, a principal backer of the last rebellion.

Upper Academy meant school uniforms. It meant short skirts and boys ogling my soft, round thighs above my three-quarter length stockings. It meant watching where we sat and looking out for tricks like boys dropping things on the floor so that they could look up our skirts at our white, lacy panties. It also meant sleeping in a dormitory of twenty other girls, dressing with and in front of them as the mistresses, most of them from Lannan, and I knew what *that* meant, tried to make us bond as young women to each other. Some girls, like me, were very fearful of the process. They must be, if they were originally men, like me.

Lady Julia Greening, a stunning long-haired brunette, with a fully-developed female figure, greeted me by coming to sit on my bed and watch me put away my dresses in the wardrobe provided. "Everyone is going to expect us to fight," she said. Her beautiful face wrinkled into a frown as she watched me put away the bronze sheath I had worn in Liffey. "Greening and Sutcliffe, on opposite sides in the civil war," she went on. "With you here now to crow over the defeated, they'll have to take sides again." She looked up at me. I looked down at her long, athletic body stretched out on my bed and wished, surprisingly, that I still had my penis. Julia was dark and attractive and most definitely a woman. I had dealt with many women but few so close at hand or so instantly challenging.

"Want to arm wrestle?" I asked, picking up a dainty nightie that I wanted to put in my night case which Lady Julia was partly leaning on.

Her smile was like a ray of sunshine. I couldn't help myself, I smiled back. Julia sat up and handed me the night case. "We had no idea what my grandfather was up to," she sighed, "but everyone thinks we must have. The Old Party which wants to throw out Lord Rohan's reforms think I should be their spokeswoman here but my part of the family has always been a supporter of the new laws. I can't wait till we women get the vote and put a woman on the council."

"Well, that's going a little far," I protested. "My parents think that the status quo is pretty daring for Carmichael."

Julia laughed and stood up, as tall as me in the blocky high heels we all had to wear for school classes. "So you're the conservative and I'm the liberal," she said, neatly switching the sort of affiliations our families were known for. "This should make for an interesting term."

I grinned back at her as Julia eyed me critically. "You have to wear lipstick to class," she said pointing to her own pink lips, "and be neat and groomed, even here." She put her hand on the front of her panties. "They inspect us to be sure that we've shaved if we have to." I pulled a face at her. "It's true," she insisted. "It's most embarrassing. They don't do it on any schedule. They just show up and you have to pull your panties down and they check you out. They even sniff you all over. It's horrible when they send you off to get bathed as if you were in the Lower Academy again. You have to strip and wash in front of their detainees. You know what little girls are like, gawking at you."

I couldn't believe what Julia did next. She lifted her skirt, lowered her panties and used the feminine spray left on my night table liberally over her tiny amount of pubic hair, her vagina and panties. "You



should do the same," said Julia, handing me the spray. "I bet they inspect us today since we have a new girl. Go on," she encouraged me, looking at the other girls talking and giggling at the other end of the room. "Don't worry about us looking at each other. We are all girls together here, aren't we?"

So I did what Julia had done and she got to see my blonde hairs and my smooth vagina, so recently the most enticing part of my body to my husband. I felt hot all over as I thought of his caresses, his mouth and his penetrations of me.

Julia smiled at me. "You've done it, haven't you?" she asked directly as I patted my skirt and panties into place. "You've done the dirty deed with a man, haven't you?"

"What a thing to ask!" I said, feigning shock, but Lady Julia took my arm and looked earnestly into my face.

"They try to keep us all virgins in here," Julia said. "But if the other girls find out that you're not, you're going to be besieged for war stories, that's what we call them, by all the girls, even those in the lower classes." She guided me across to the other pretty girls who mostly wore skirts and blouses like mine, high heels like mine and stockings like mine. Those who didn't were changing casually, replacing holiday clothes, including silky, black bras with the white lace push-ups the school insisted upon. All were made-up very well.

Of the fourteen Lannan girls, 'geecee' girls, gender-corrected girls in the terminology used at Lannan, creeping out into everyday use, only four were of interest to me. One of those four must have been Davert Stillwell, according to Eloise, Lady Caroline's new secretary and secret bodyguard. Each had been purchased from Lannan as a daughter and been adopted directly into noble families. Lannan was still doing that, making daughters for the wealthy, making the nanotech transformations of rebels and some criminals into little girls. They were raised and pampered by their new families and set to be married as rewards to the sons of high-ranking retainers or to cement family ties in the lesser nobility, where daughters were few.

"Melissa, welcome," said auburn-haired Jennifer Yost, a girl who was one of the four I was interested in. She got up, pushed her shoulder-length hair behind her ears, then she leaned forward and hugged me. I couldn't believe how tiny her waist was nor how lovely she smelled, of gardenias but also of something else.

"The Yosts are perfumiers," said a blonde, brown-eyed girl next to Jennifer, her eyes sparkling as she smiled. "I'm Lady Yvonne Barkley and I don't smell half as good as Jenny."

She hugged me as well and I got used to touching my breasts to those of young women as they also touched smooth faces to mine. I was Melissa and I was one of them, accepted. I hugged Denise Crofton, a red-haired girl with green eyes and huge green earrings. Catherine Jury was a long-legged, blue-eyed blonde, her short hair in waves. Emma Ruston, another blonde, was still getting dressed in school girl clothes so I hugged her bare chest as she babbled to Cindy, a girl sitting on Emma's bed with her, about how wonderful William had been to her. She showed us all how she used makeup to cover up the hickey on her breast.

Like Jennifer Yost, these three girls had been adopted within the time period when Davert Stillwell must have been given a nanotech transformation. He had been much more

cooperative than his brother in Liffey. He had lost his six-two frame and become a five-five schoolgirl. He seemed to have loved the role. At least, these four did. It should be easy, Eloise had said, a schoolmistress herself once upon a time, before becoming my bodyguard. Talk to the girls. They'll tell you everything. Girls like to talk. Besides knowing the right way to curtsy to a Lady of the Protectorate, Davert Stillwell would also know how to fly a war attack thopter. He'd been shot down in one and captured, stunned and wounded, in the wreckage.

"Oh, you're in trouble if Mistress Denise catches you," said Julia with a mocking smile to the prancing Emma. I could think of no other way to describe her bubbly girlishness. It wasn't possible that this girl could ever have been a boy. But our few titillating records said that she was a geecee girl.

"So what!" squealed the womanly Emma, putting on her white bra, just like mine. "It will be worth it. William McLean is so, so ..."

"Handysome," gushed Cindy, her friend who sported the same hairstyle.

"Oh yes," said Emma in breathy, over-accented cutesy tones, her eyes going dreamy as if that was a wonderful thing. All the girls laughed at her.

"Who's William McLean?" I asked Julia, who had put her arm through mine and led me to her bed and bedside table. She offered me a lipstick; it was the same shade of pink she had used on her own lips earlier in the day. I looked in her mirror at myself, at the cute, little blonde schoolgirl pursing her lips in a kiss and making her lips Passionate Pink.

"Keep it," said Julia with a smile as I finished and ran my lips together as girls do to even out the lipstick. "I've got a lot more in that shade. You'll meet William McLean when we have classes with the boys at the University. We have dances here as well, almost every week, but the list of boys changes all the time."

"There are always more boys than girls," I said, pouting as I finished coloring my lips. Julia indicated again that I was to keep the lipstick. "We have to give them all a chance at us. We should be allowed three husbands, shouldn't we, instead of it being the other way round."

Julia grimaced. She slipped her arm again through mine and led me out into the hallway where girls from everywhere, hundreds of them, were pouring down the wide staircases and into a huge hall where, all dressed alike, we stood in rows waiting for the headmistress to come and speak to us all. To me, who had never done it all before, it was fascinating. The babble of girlish voices rose; it seemed many were greeting old friends they hadn't seen in an age.

There was not a man in sight. Everything was female, including the portraits of the school's and Academy's former star pupils. I recognized many of them, like the young Lady Margot Raines and Lady Louise Greening, Julia's mother.

I had arrived at the Greening Institute just in time for the start of the Fall term. My daughter, Joanne, was doing this very thing back in Shannondale and my sons were in boys' school. The baby, Fiona, was in the care of nannies. Now, here was I, biosculpted to look like a twenty-year-old in a long row of same-aged, mature, young women, all made up beautifully. Many looked bored by the whole proceedings.

A new reform of Rohan's was to have girls educated in the same courses as boys. But there was much opposition, most of it from women's groups. Such reforms had still not reached Greening. I had classes in deportment, not rough physical education like the boys, and beauty culture rather than business. I could learn to be a nurse or a teacher, even an actress or a dancer but no girls were in physics and math. The surprising thing was the number of doctors and scientists in Lannan and Coldhaven, despite the opposition. Surprising to others, perhaps, if they ever thought about it. I, however, had a very good idea where all the female doctors on Carmichael came from.

All the girls stood and quieted as Mistress Elaine Bowen walked up to the platform. She was attractive and barely looked older than me. Of course, with all the longevity drugs and nanobodies used to maintain good health, all people looked good these days.

Headmistress Bowen welcomed the former students back and welcomed us new girls as well. We had to stand again and be recognized. I felt a thousand eyes and more on me as I was the only Upper Academy girl who was new. She had an announcement of some importance, she said soberly, and I listened intently, expecting a reference to new classes. This was the last year for many in the Upper Academy at Greening School, she said. She intended that we would graduate as young women that the Institute could be proud of. We could anticipate daily inspections on every aspect of our grooming as we were models, quite literally, for the younger girls in the school.

Then came the big announcement. The first fashion show was just a week away and, though it was a rush, she was counting on the Upper Academy to be most co-operative in the matter of assisting younger girls in fittings. The girls who had been to the Institute before were all seamstresses and had taken design and modelling classes. The two years of the Upper Academy now were expected to show that off to the school, to the ladies of Greening and to the press. The fashion designer, Lady Aileen Semple, was someone whom we only saw on vid screens. The school was fortunate to have a designer of her magnitude—she designed for Lady Caroline Sutcliffe—come to Greening in support of the education girls like us received. We were, after all, the future Ladies of the Protectorate and should expect to receive such assignments. Mistress Bowen knew that it was because the fame of the school was spreading that this opportunity was offered.

"More like because we have Melissa Sutcliffe here," Julia stage-whispered to me and almost all of my row heard her. I knew Aileen Semple. It was probably Eloise who had put her up to coming to Greening. That meant Eloise would be able to contact me easily. I imagined Eloise as a fashion model on the runway. She was taller than most girls I knew and, with her flame-colored hair, she looked sensational in anything with black or leather in it. But on Carmichael, size did not matter in being a model. All the girls would be undersized. Only our heels would push us up close to the required height for interstellar fashion models.

This would not be an easy job, Eloise said to me. The families and schools were even more secretive about information than Ren Grother but, unlike him, they should be easier to get around. "Just talk to the girls," said Eloise. "They know who they are. One of them is Davert Stillwell and she has no reason to hide it from you."

But I could not get any of the girls I needed to talk to alone with me. My new 'best friend,' Lady Julia, stuck to me everywhere I went about the school, even to the bathroom.

I had forgotten that girls always went in pairs and that we chatted just about everything and nothing, mostly about boys and sex. Julia was proving to be just the sort of girl she had warned me against.

We were inspected twice on the first day, as Lady Julia had predicted. I passed, thanks to her advice, while the luckless Emma Ruston didn't. She was supposedly having her period and she didn't have her tampon in. "I-I haven't flowed yet," she tried to explain but the mistresses doing the explanation would not let her off. She had to attend afternoon detention and demonstrate for the developing class how to insert a tampon and how to use other feminine hygienic products.

"When is your period?" Mistress Alexandra, who also taught ballet, asked me.

"At the end of the month," I told her. I often bled quite profusely, a consequence of the Ivany special nanotech transformation I had been subjected to. Most geecee girls didn't but were conditioned to have a 'time of the month' by their doctors as well as their own desires.

By the fourth day of doing womanly things, I had learned how to make myself a mud-pack out of different kinds of vegetable pastes. I was almost beside myself because I could not get away from the clingy Lady Julia. Luckily, Eloise came with Lady Aileen Semple's designers and so she took me off for a 'special' fitting, for a bridal gown that was Aileen's earlier specialty.

Eloise solved my problem in her usual efficient way. "We need someone from the Academy to introduce the models as they go through. How about you be the emcee for your group? That will mean that you have to talk to each of them and find out a little about them. Surely a skilled investigator like yourself can find out which girl is which."

"A skilled investigator I might be in a rational society," I said as she fitted the lace bodice to my slim waist. She flared the long, silk and satin skirts about my legs, marking off the proper length of the dress that I was chosen to wear. All the girls would be brides in the finale. "But this is a society of man-crazed, sexually starved, young women. Rohan is absolutely right that the education of young women has to change."

Eloise laughed. "You have a dance tonight, I see on the schedule," she said, lifting my dress and putting new garters, frilly and edged in light blue ruffles about my stockings, just below the suspenders of my garter belt. Just the touch of her soft hand sent strange thrills through me, reminding me that I was a woman. I was a woman and so other women could touch my soft skin and I should feel nothing odd about it. I couldn't help it. I felt such touches intensely and I loved them. I didn't need both garters and a garter belt but it was a tradition of the bridal auction that a woman surrender her garters to her husband's coterie of groomsmen and friends.

"I'll start on the interviews tomorrow," I said, trying not to let my tension show.

"I've heard the other girls talking about tonight," said Eloise with a smile. "Did you know about the Kissing Dances and the birds' nests?"

"Birds' nests?" I asked, letting her help me out of the dress as she gave me sketches of what my hair and makeup must look like to compliment the dress. "There aren't any such structures out in the gardens."

Eloise laughed. "When a boy asks you to go to see the bird's nest, it means one of five places these girls have already got set up to have it off with the young men who offer. I understand that at least a third of the girls at the dance will be laid twice before the end of the dance. Only a few of the two top years won't be because their chosen swains are not on the invitation list. William McLean is every girl's favorite but, as Cindy Marsh told me, he always likes to be first with a new girl. She and Emma Ruston are in a friendly competition to see who gets him after you've finished with him."

"I told you!" I said. "They're sex-mad here. How did you find out so much?"

Eloise grinned. "I asked," she said slyly, and I had to remember that she had once been a teacher of young girls at Alice Dronnell's Shannon Institute. "I encouraged and I left my recorder on when I had to go and get my pinning needles."

"Don't the teachers know what is going on?" I asked as I stepped out of my gown. She began to take my lingerie off me leaving me quite naked in a sea of girls across the large room, many naked themselves already as they changed panties and stockings for new outfits for the show. It was amazing how comfortable I felt being a nude young woman. But if a man had walked in, I, a man myself, would have run squealing into hiding, just as all the girls would have done.

"Of course they do," said Eloise. "I always did at Alice Dronnell's. The girls cover for each other by saying, 'She's taking a turn about the gardens.' The gardens here are outstanding, you know, but they will be quite chilly. The young men often bring the girls back with their jackets about them. It's a signal to other guys that he has just scored in a big way. So, don't let Willie-boy put his jacket about you to keep you warm, no matter what you have done with him. You're still a new girl, after all."

It all seemed so dispassionate. I couldn't think of my own daughter getting involved in anything so tawdry. But then girls of this age, nineteen and twenty, shouldn't be kept in school when really they were adults.

"They do supervise the younger girls much more tightly," said Eloise. "Even the eighteen-year-olds are lucky to get a stolen kiss or two, but they do get lots of slow, clingy waltzes."

VIII. THE GIRLS OF GREENING ACADEMY

Headmistress Elaine Bowen gave me the assignment to introduce each of the girls from my dormitory as if she was giving me the heaviest and weightiest assignment in the school that year. I had to submit my intended remarks to Mistress Alexandra who was organizing the whole show on behalf of the school. She hoped that it was not too heavy a task for me but it was a quick way for me to learn about other girls in the school. I thanked her for the opportunity. Then I had to scurry back to my dorm where most of the girls were bare-breasted and in panties as they sat about waiting for our turn in the showers and bathtubs.

Lady Julia had to be the first of my interviews, of course, as we showered together. I wasn't used to that at all, being surrounded by so much flesh, so much *feminine* flesh. There were breasts everywhere. I tried to see if Jennifer, Emma, Denise or Catherine was in any way put out by the parade, but none of them seemed to be. I saw Denise talking ani-

matedly to Jennifer, both of them naked. Then Jennifer laughed at something said and turned to repeat it to another girl, Giselle, I think.

Catherine was in another group of four that were soaping each other's fronts, quite oblivious to Andrea touching her rounded backside familiarly with a large sponge. Emma was actually dancing with Cindy under a row of hot showers and Yvonne Barkley joined them in a giggling group. I heard Emma shriek something about William while Cindy shook her head, her thin eyebrows disappearing as she washed her face in one of the streams of water.

The excitement of getting ready for the dance was so high that it took me till the next morning, long after the dance was over, to be able to interview the girls I wanted. Emma Ruston was still in bed when I went and sat on her bed with my notebook in hand. Julia had been called to a dress fitting with Eloise. She had wanted me to go with her but Eloise had been firm in dismissing me.

I grinned at Emma and she frowned at me in my blouse and school uniform.

"It's a day off," she said peevishly. "We don't have to wear those tacky skirts and stockings today."

I told her about the task I had been given and she groaned. "Just introduce me as the class drunk," she said, clutching the covers up about her pink, frilly nightie. "That's all anyone needs to know about me."

I sympathized with her and she suddenly rolled over and looked at me from her bright blue eyes. "You and William McLean," Emma said. "You disappeared for hours. You have to tell us the story." She smiled. "Cindy was most put out. I told her to settle for Thomas Denverry but she really wanted Willie Boy last night. I saw him in the garden with you under the orange trees. He had his arms about you and then you disappeared. Where did you go?"

What could I say to her? That I was supposed to be interrogating her and she was not to be asking questions of me? "You should have told me what a genuinely nice guy William McLean was," I said truthfully. "The way you all talked beforehand, I thought he was some sort of sleazeball I was just going to string me along for a while, then turn loose for one of you."

Emma smiled. "But he's so dishy, isn't he?" she sighed. "When I'm in his arms, I really do forget that I'm already married."

That jarred me. I hadn't seen that in the data base. "Whoa!" I exclaimed. "When did that happen? Do your parents know about it?"

Emma gave me a dirty look and began to push me off her bed. "Who do you think arranged it?" she asked, reaching then for the chrono and looking at the time.

"You haven't been through a bridal auction," I said and she smiled back at me as she sat up, the thin nightdress showing off her large, dark nipples and shapely breasts.

"How would you know?" Emma asked with a smirk.

“I have this emcee assignment,” I said, giving out the best cover story I could come up with. “So I have enlisted my parents’ research team to help me. I’ve got much material on everybody but I don’t know what’s important to you and what I should leave out.”

Emma turned back the covers on her bed and swung her feet out. She was not wearing any panties. I recalled the monitors saying that she was supposed to be having her period. She certainly did not have a tampon in. I could see that.

Emma got out of bed and her loose, see-through nightie showed me what a fine, feminine figure she had. “You can say whatever you like about me,” she said, taking a robe from the inside door of her wardrobe. Then she headed off to the bathrooms. I followed her.

I made sure we were alone as she washed her face and ran one of the baths with warm water, a fragrance of peach blossoms rising as she tossed salts into the water. I pulled up a soft cushioned wicker chair. Emma giggled at me as she took off her nightie and stood before me, completely female and completely naked.

“You get off looking at naked girls?” Emma asked with an impish smile on her ample, luscious lips. She undid the little braids that held her blonde hair in little pigtailed and shook her hair about her shoulders, clearly loving the touch of her soft hair on her shoulders.

“I have to introduce you,” I persisted. “I should tell who you are and about your parents. I should probably let the guys know you are married.”

“You can leave that out,” Emma said, getting into the bath. “I really think you looked so much nicer last night in that bronze-colored dress. I loved the way it hugged your figure. Were you wearing a bra? Callan Sechie didn’t think so. He was the dark boy I was dancing with at first. He’s nearly as nice as Willie Boy. He’ll probably be my second husband. That’s why I let him take me into the bird’s nest through the drying room by the pool. The couch in there is soft but it doesn’t creak at all, not like the one in the staff room.”

I could vouch for that. William had found the creaking very funny but I hadn’t. It had only made me feel silly to be letting a man, barely out of adolescence, have his way with me. Ah, but his touch had been electric. One look at me and he said that he knew I was the perfect girl for him. He didn’t care if we did it that night or not. William only wanted to hold me and have me let him kiss me while he tried to prove to me how much he loved me since the ‘thunderbolt,’ or love at first sight, had hit him.

William McLean was remarkably handsome in a rugged, masculine way. When he first kissed me, I felt electricity shoot through every part of me and I couldn’t disguise it from him. I had not felt so womanly, possibly ever in my life. My breasts—no, I hadn’t worn a bra—had risen in the thin dress that shimmered all over my overheated skin. He touched me and I felt such a hunger rise inside me that it was palpable. I followed him as he danced me onto the patio and walked me through the garden.

William had a key to an unmarked door, clearly not a ‘bird’s nest’ for that evening. I melted in his arms and let him caress my breasts behind the closed door. It was only a matter of time before he led me to the empty staff room and, with enervating courtesy and

gentleness. made love to me, his soft words thrilling me, making me feel more womanly than I had ever felt in my life.

It was tradition that we only spend so long away, William whispered, as I tried to control my soaring emotions. To heck with tradition. He wanted me again and again. He started to remove my stockings as he had my panties with his gentle, mobile mouth. I went into spasms of ecstasy which he did nothing to soften. He just stroked my rear and my breasts and encouraged me to go even further into uncontrollable desire for his perfect, and aroused, male body.

Emma was smiling at me from her scented bath as I jolted myself back into awareness of what I was doing. I knew why I had dressed as a school girl that day. I had to remind myself what I was doing at the Greening Institute. I was getting nowhere with Emma just as I had been diverted the night before by such an attractive man as William McLean.

"There's something else I should leave out about you," I said slowly.

"Don't leave out a thing," said Emma. She took a bowl and began to run water over her hair which she then covered with a scented foam.

"I can't tell them all about your life before you became a geecee daughter." She froze in washing herself. "What was it that you were? A thopter pilot? A gunner? That should have earned you a medal from the General."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Emma said, staring at me, her lovely, thin eyebrows lowered over her beautiful eyes. Her eyelashes were so thick and natural, not artificial as I had first supposed.

"Quite an achievement," I said, indicating her lithe, female body. "A six-two he-man who's become a daughter and a wife apparently. Will you be a mother soon as well?"

Emma stood up in the bath and, taking the mobile shower, furiously rinsed the soap from herself. "Ronald has started to crash," she said through gritted teeth. "He married me to unite his lands to my parents, his friends. He won't let me see him and, no, I cannot be a mother to his children, though I would if I could. When he dies, and it will probably be sometime next year, it will be in all the media. We had a glorious honeymoon on Nebula Prime where we were married. I thought I was going to be living with him when we came back here but my mother brought me back, dumped me here and explained that I was not to see him again."

Tears flowed down her face. "So I'm stuck here," Emma said savagely, "playing silly games with Callan Sechie and now with you about my life as an infantry sergeant. Well, you can stuff that, Melissa Sucking Sutcliffe. Say what you like about me. The most wonderful man in the world, who showed me how to love as a woman, is dying. I cannot even be there to hold his hand and tell him how much I love him."

Emma got out of the bath and stalked off to our dormitory, quite naked, towelling her hair; her breasts bounced with each step she took. I hadn't the nerve to go after her. I gathered up her panties, robe and slippers, and gave them to a worried-looking Cindy Marsh who came looking for them.

Cindy gave me an awful look as she went off as well. I hoped that Emma hadn't said anything to jeopardize her standing with the other girls of Greening Institute. But I had at

least discovered that she was not Davert Stillwell. I felt absolutely rotten about the way that I had done it, though. I promised to be much easier on the next girl I interviewed.

Jennifer Yost was in the back of the Institute's library where I went to hide out from the guilt that came over me after the interview with Emma Ruston. She smiled at me as I sat in the empty seat next to her terminal where she was watching previous Lady Aileen Semple fashion shows.

"Where is your shadow?" Jennifer asked, her auburn hair gleaming as if it had been brushed a hundred times that morning, as it probably had. In a white, loose blouse and short hot pink skirt, she looked very sexy. I couldn't get over how the girls had taken so easily to the new fashions, especially short skirts, that were sweeping through Carmichael's towns. To wear a long dress and bustle outside now would be like a most awful faux pas. I had to have my short skirts as well, but Jennifer had gone farther; her skirt was all the way up her thighs, showing off her shapely legs!

"Lady Julia is with the designers," I said. "They decided to change all her dresses in the fashion show and they're working on a new look for her."

"That's nice," said Jennifer with a genuinely beautiful smile. "Julia loves being the center of attention, as you've probably noticed. You being new and a Sutcliffe are the hottest thing around so, naturally, she's gravitated to you. She was most put out with you at the dance last night, you know."

"Because I went off with William McLean?" I asked and Jennifer laughed.

"No," Jennifer said. "That dress you wore. It was from off-world, wasn't it? I would love to wear it, the way it clung to your body and showed off everything, including that you were not wearing a bra. That's why every boy in the place wanted to dance with you. Even when we were supposed to be floating about in their arms, absorbing their come-hither glances, they were watching your titties bounce. Didn't you see Julia get mad at Jerome Lurry? He was dancing with her and couldn't take his eyes off *you*."

I hadn't noticed. I had been so self-conscious over being a girl in a beautiful dress and high heels, my hair pinned up, a valuable necklace at my throat, that I barely noticed what other girls were doing. The way the boys were looking at me had unnerved me enough. Luckily, William McLean came and took my hand and kissed it. I instinctively curtsied to him and he took possession of me. I liked that attention well enough until we came to the first Kissing Dance.

When the music stopped, William swung me half off my feet and I had no excuse not to kiss him then, marking him as mine with my lipstick. That was when *liking* turned into *loving*. Shakily and eagerly, I let him devour my lips in our second kiss which went on long after the music started again. Soon after, his arm about my slim waist, I agreed that he could show me the gardens and possibly a bird's nest.

"Was everyone watching me?" I asked in frustration as I thought of the loving I entered into so wholeheartedly in the staff room

"Not you. William," said Jennifer in amusement. "He's usually more circumspect in his choices but he is definitely the alpha male among the university students in Greening. Didn't you feel it? You looked like you were smitten as badly as Veronica Rankell said

William told her he was. She served him a drink of punch when you went to powder your nose with Julia.”

“Can I ask you some questions to help me introduce you to the audience from the town?” I asked her, my fingers crossed. “I have to do it for Bowen. She thinks it is a good way for me to get to know everybody.”

Jennifer agreed and told me all about her family’s business. She told me how they imported many fragrances but also made their own, using a sort of ambergris from the oil whales, not related directly to Terran mammals at all, that were found in the ocean west of Greening. Hence its name, the Ambergris Ocean.

Jennifer told me all about growing up as a little girl in Greening and about her Papa always trying out all his new concoctions on her. She had a favorite at home, made especially for her, but she never brought it to school; her father called it ‘Jen-Princess’ after her. She blushed as she told me that.

I knew it was all untrue. Jennifer had not been a little girl. She had not been a fairy in a pageant as she also recounted to me. She had not had hopes of being a ballerina when she was a little girl. She probably did think Mistress Alexandra’s ballet class was the best class of all at Greening Institute. I was sure her parents would love to see her in the lead in the classical ballet the Institute was planning this year. She had been in the chorus many times before, but being the lead meant dancing with Gregory Lannory. It meant being held and lifted by him day after day. He was so strong and manly and he bedded all his partners. She blushed as she said that, excited at the anticipation of being made love to by her male dancing partner.

I asked her about her other skills, such as mixing perfumes.

“I have no other skills,” Jennifer said dreamily, her mind still off somewhere, day-dreaming about Gregory, I was sure.

I frowned. “Didn’t one of the other girls say something about you being able to fly a thopter?” I asked, looking back officiously in the notebook I had been using to keep all the girls’ biographies.

“Me? Fly a thopter?” giggled Jennifer, uncrossing her legs with a noticeable silky rasp. “Whoever told you that? Someone is putting you on. Actually, I am awful with any kind of machinery. Everyone knows that. I don’t even drive a crawler and that’s the slowest thing there is. Papa said I had a conniption once when he put me behind the wheel. I was so scared I was going to crash. I tried it again last year and I really didn’t like it. The crawler doesn’t seem to want to go where I want it to.”

No thopter pilot meant no Davert Stillwell. I had no need to confront Jennifer about once being a man as I had Emma. I thanked her for the data as I saw Denise Crofton entering the library arm-in-arm with Lady Yvonne Barkley.

I had to talk to both of them so I excused myself from Jennifer and went to corner them, specifically Denise. The redhead regarded me somberly as I approached them.

“Whatever did you say to Emma Ruston?” Yvonne wanted to know belligerently. “I’ve never seen her that upset in my life.” She looked angrily at me. “She’s one of the sweetest girls here in Greening.”

"I didn't mean to hurt her," I said, trying to be apologetic; I found that it came easily. I did regret hurting Emma although I don't think I would have got accurate answers from her as I wouldn't have from Grother and Rosemary without applying a little force. I explained about what I was supposed to be doing for the fashion show in the middle of the next week. Two pairs of darkly madeup eyes regarded me seriously.

Lady Yvonne Barkley was the only daughter of the scientist and industrialist, Lord Kevan Barkley, also known as Lord Wellesham after the small coastal town where he had set up several canning factories as well as having the finest vineyards on the planet. He was a rarity among the older Lords of the Protectorate in only having one wife.

"I was a tomboy until I got to Greening and met Denise," she said. The two smiled at each other and squeezed hands. "She taught me how to be a girl, much to Daddy's delight. He says he will formally adopt her as my sister any time the Croftons want to give her up."

"Is that likely?" I asked lightly, smiling.

Denise frowned, her thickly outlined green eyes serious. "No," she said with a scowl. She gave Yvonne a quick look and Yvonne smiled wryly.

"Everyone else knows," said Yvonne. "So you might as well tell Melissa."

Denise sighed. Her light green blouse was almost transparent and I could see that she wore a bra and slip beneath it. Her longer skirt, wide and dark green, accentuated her waist, rustling each time she moved.

"Did you see the boy with whom I had to dance the first Kissing Dance?" she asked. I had noticed Denise because of what I knew about her. I had been admiring her nerve to wear a dress so low-cut, front and back, that it might have been called a foundation garment just a year or so ago. It was shorter as well, dark layers of silk building out from her tiny waist, emphasizing her womanly hips. She had such beautiful cleavage as well. The Willen Smit part of me had looked at her and something stirred in me as I minced down the steps into the chandeliered ballroom. But then the tall William McLean turned from a group of young men and looked at me. All thoughts of Willen Smit fled from me instantly.

"I didn't," I had to admit.

"Mama adopted me to have someone for Niklas to marry," she said. She lifted her hand and I saw the emerald betrothal ring on her left hand. Her fingers were long and graceful, her shiny nail polish matching her softly painted lips. "He's such an idiot. He knows I'm to marry him so he always asks me for the Kissing Dances. Ugh, it's *so* awful, kissing him."

"You don't like kissing men?" I asked, glancing at Yvonne. The two of them looked askance at me.

"Are you implying that I want to kiss *girls*?" asked a scandalized Denise.

"You *do* kiss me," said Yvonne, smiling as she squeezed her friend's hand.

"Yes, but that's not like kissing Tom Denverry," said Denise, with a big smile at her friend.

"Or Jem Lurry," Yvonne added.

“Or Arran Lighter,” Denise went on, hugging herself and closing her eyes briefly at a remembered caress.

“That was last term,” protested Yvonne. “It’s my turn to have him when he shows up at our next dance.”

“You see,” said Denise seriously to me, “Yvonne and I don’t see why we shouldn’t have the same husband. We get along so well. But it’s going to be so hard for a young man to purchase two wives,” she added gloomily. “And Mama wants Nik and me to give her a grandchild before her one hundredth birthday. I keep trying to interest him in lower class girls but they take one look at him and scarper. If it wasn’t for Mama adopting me from Lannan, Niklas would never find a wife. We’re not super-rich like Yvonne’s family.”

“So I’m going to marry first,” said Yvonne, “to someone who likes us both. And then my husband will have to use my fortune to outbid Niklas Crofton for Denise at her bridal auction.”

“That’s the plan,” said Denise, rustling her skirts as she re-crossed her legs. “All we have to do is find the right man.” She smiled provocatively. “You wouldn’t like to put in a good word with William McLean for us, would you, Melissa? We would be wives two and three for bedtime with him on occasions.”

Yvonne snorted, and turned in her seat as Julia came waltzing into the library in a new, Semple-designed straight skirt with a halter top. I had one just like it at home in Shannondale.

“Just one minute,” I asked Denise. Yvonne stood and joined Jennifer and a couple of other girls who clustered about a pirouetting Julia, who was beaming at being the center of attention.

“Does Yvonne know what being adopted from Lannan means?” I asked Denise.

Denise eyed me warily, her heart-shaped face perfectly complimented by her styled, red hair. “Do you, Melissa?” she asked at last.

I nodded. “I know Lannan very well,” I said. “I never forget what I was before my family adopted me and made me their girl.”

Denise nodded and looked over at the chattering girls, giving a smile to Lady Yvonne who looked back at us. I mimed writing something in my book. “I don’t forget my wife,” she said, looking at Yvonne. “And I know my friendship with Yvonne is because she looks a lot like my Grace did before the firing squads on Pastor got her. I never want to go back to that again, seeing women and children sliced up by cutter beams and blasters. And really,” she smiled sadly, “I don’t want to make love to her as I did Grace. I’ve become the kind of female who wants a man who will love and protect her. I love being a woman. I *am* a woman now. William McLean would be so nice for me but I think I’ll be stuck with Nik. If I am, I can tell you that I *will* have affairs on the side.”

Davert had never married. I promised that the Lannan information was not going to go in my introduction of her. Inside, I felt relief. Now I knew who was the Stillwell I needed to interview. It was Catherine Jury, the long-legged blonde. She came in with one of the teachers to see what the ruckus was all about in the data center and so the girls’ party broke up. Julia fastened herself onto me as Yvonne was fastened to Denise. Julia was ex-

cited over the fashion show and the bridal gown she was to wear. She showed me the sketches Eloise had made for her as I watched Catherine Jury hug Jennifer Yost. By the actions they mimed, I had a good idea that they were sharing whatever they had done at the dance the night before.

I should have known it was Catherine. She was a natural blonde like her 'sister,' Rosemary, and there was a resemblance about the blue eyes. She pushed her hair back behind her ears just like Rosemary did as well. I couldn't wait to interview her and get this part of finding Oliver Stillwell's brothers over with.

IX. THE REAL DAVERT STILLWELL

I didn't get a chance in the next few days to talk to Catherine Jury. We were all kept very busy by the upcoming fashion show. Vidcast reporters and cameramen came in the next day, took over the ballroom and set it up so that the whole show would be presented to the planet as a whole on one of the commercial cable outlets that had sprung into being since I first came to Carmichael.

All of us girls had to have big hair so I didn't recognize Catherine at first when she came and stood beside me in her five-inch heels, just like mine. Our halter tops showed off our breasts as we sashayed down the runway at practice. I quivered inside as I thought how it would look on vid. I posed as the director, talking to Eloise, watched each of us critically. He could not have found fault with Catherine at all. She was the perfect model, her eyes black and her lips the softest pink as she gave the cameramen her model's stare. Then we both swished our dresses over our thin stockings and pirouetted so that they could see we were in garter belts and stockings.

The director came over to us as we headed into the dressing area where high-pitched girls' voices came abounding. "Lose the bras, both of you," the director shouted. "And let's do it again!"

Right there in the open, we had to open our tops and remove the strapless push-up bras. Another assistant of Aileen's came and positioned the halters just so, tightening mine a little so that I didn't burst out while around me, technicians, all male of course, gawked at me.

"You get used to it," Catherine said to me as I looked to Eloise who raised her eyebrows. So she had arranged this for me to be next to my quarry again. Catherine smiled and raised her hand to her mane of golden hair, a wig like mine. "I've missed this. My last boy friend back home persuaded me to have a modern cut. But I think I like this look better on me, don't you?"

I wore a hairpiece as well, my natural hair forming bangs across my forehead. We strutted down the runway again and had to stop and have our halters loosened so that we could jiggle to the music, as the director wanted. Then we had to rehearse with a male model, an older man who sauntered up to us. We had to lift our shoulders and dance about him as if we really wanted him, flicking up our skirts to show off what we still wore of our underwear, frilly garter belts and tiny panties.

"Yes, that's it," the director said. Julia and Jennifer followed us, arching and dancing as we had done, being as femininely sexy as the two men in front of them, if the truth were known, had been.

"You're introducing us at the kiddies' parade," said Catherine as we went into the models' room. Our dresses were whisked from us and we stood there, bare-breasted, in our panties, garter belts and stockings while the dressers consulted their lists on what should come next and marked our former dresses so that we would be dressed on the day in the order we should be.

"I'm supposed to be," I said. "But I haven't had time to speak to you yet about what I should say about you."



"Well, we're here now," said Catherine, smiling at the hubbub and arguments going on in front of us. "Ask away."

"Why did your parents adopt you?" I asked and she looked at me sharply.

"How did you know that?" she asked. "Oh, you're a Sutcliffe, Melissa Sutcliffe. Well, I have my own ideas. I think I am going to be unadopted really soon."

"Why is that?" I asked, not sure where this line of enquiry was going to go.

"I think Brennan Jury adopted me to be his next wife," Catherine said frankly. "He and Mother are having fights over marrying me off and what I am allowed to do with my share of the bride price. She wants to sell me and buy a sea cottage up near Wellesham. She thinks she can get a new daughter from Lannan, as old as me and not so sexually precocious."

"You?" I asked, surprised that she would confide in me so quickly.

“Oh, yes,” Catherine said with a smile. “I’ve been boy-mad since Mother took me home from Lannan and I went for a walk to explore our place. Our gardener had me in hours of being on the place. Ah, Andy Redding. He loved my long hair and my garter belts and stockings. I didn’t wear panties for the longest time so that he could give me a quickie, front or rear, it didn’t matter to me then. He was scared that he was going to get me pregnant.”

Catherine smiled at the memory of her first lover. “Andy got sent to the army and I was sent here to get away from men and to learn to be a young lady,” she chattered on. “What a joke! I’ve had more sex here than I ever did at home. I know the boys call me a nympho but you’d better not say *that* when you introduce me. It’s because sometimes I take two of them at a time if they argue about who’s next with me. I really should have been a comfort girl, shouldn’t I? I’d have been very good at it, I think.”

I thought of Rosemary in Liffey. “Your brother was very good at it before he became pregnant,” I said, knowing how stupid the male pronouns sounded.

“Who?” asked Catherine Jury, waving her arms, as a dresser called our names and hurried over with summery dresses for us both. A makeup artiste stopped and made us purse our lips as she retouched up our glossy pink lips before smiling and saying we would do.

“I don’t have any brothers,” said Catherine Jury. “I’m the only daughter. My mother is from Lannan, too, you know.”

“I meant your brothers from before that,” I said. She gave me a very sharp look. “Oliver is still looking for you.”

Catherine eyed me suspiciously. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m an investigator,” I told her. “Your brother, Oliver, hired me to get you back, along with your other two brothers.”

“I’m supposed to have how many brothers?” Catherine asked with a big grin. “Melissa, do you ever have it wrong! I don’t have any brothers at all here on Carmichael or back on Valiant. That’s a big station out on the Magellan Route. It has no downbelow and when I was on the losing side of the insurrection, what else could the winners do but move us all out to a Hordan slaver. I joined the rebellion on that ship as well and lost there as well and was dumped up on Northern.

“I thought I had died and been reincarnated when I woke up in Lannan and I had titties and female plumbing. Oh, I fought against it and cried a lot but Andy Redding, ah, he made it all right when he kissed me and told me what a smashing girl I was. I loved the way he made me feel and how he showed me how to make love.

“I don’t intend to let them marry me off, you know. I’m going to go off on my own, to Shannondale or Duncansford, one of the bigger cities. I might find Andy again and be his woman, or I might be a comfort girl, or a dancer in one of those men’s clubs they’re reporting about in the news. I love to dance and I don’t mind men looking at me. Would you come with me? We could do a sister act?”

The last was said with quite a giggle as the dressers came to us and began arranging our dresses to fall just so. One was angry that we hadn’t changed our shoes and necklaces. “You must do that for the show itself,” she scolded us.

I sashayed down the runway again and I didn't have to feign my pouting expression. How could it be? None of the four girls from Lannan was the missing Davert! Not unless one of them had lied to me. It didn't take me long to figure it out. At least, I *thought* I had it figured out. She would probably lie to me again. It seemed to be a trait of the Stillwell brothers.

I couldn't leave in the middle of the three shows we had to do and so I am able to catch myself occasionally sashaying down the runway with Catherine Jury in our wonderful new dresses, designed by Lady Aileen Semple, on the vids my husband bought for me. We were surprisingly professional show by the third time we did it. Lining up in our bridal dresses was the hit of the show and the older matrons loved the flowers we girls tossed them, just as much as the little girls of the Institute had, in the earlier show.

In the last show of the evening with the families and community after most of the media had left, I made sure my bouquet landed in William McLean's lap, right on top of Jennifer Yost's. She smiled at me and gathered up her skirts and came and hugged me. William tried to explain to his quizzical parents why all the girls were tossing their bouquets to him as the others also did, following Jennifer's and my lead. Everyone was happy except for Emma and Cindy, who were not talking to me, and to whom I could not apologize or explain.

I saw Brennan Jury with his arm about his daughter, Catherine, and his wife, Janice. She looked just like her daughter. Since the aging process was so well controlled these days, mother looked as slim and enticing as daughter. I couldn't understand why Brennan would want to marry his adopted daughter as well. Then I caught him looking at her in an unguarded moment and I saw what Catherine had discerned. What she hadn't thought about was that he had kept his hands off her for five years. He might be in agony over his love for his daughter but I think he was an honorable man by the way he treated her.

Jennifer Yost brought me the tiniest bottle of Jen-Princess as Lady Julia, in sparkly makeup and pink ribbons, danced about her parents in her bridal dress and begged them to let her enter the Midwinter bridal auction. They were wary of me, a Sutcliffe, being so friendly with their daughter. I laughingly excused myself to go into our bathroom where Jennifer could try some of her perfume on me.

Jennifer immediately put some on my cleavage and her own. "William was making his way to you, didn't you notice?" she asked excitedly. "He won't be able to keep his mouth off you when he catches a whiff of Jen-Princess."

I had noticed William's progression. How could I have not? My heart was pounding just looking at him in his dark suit and neat tie. I felt myself blushing at the sight of him and thinking of him naked didn't help. I only remembered more the fabulous things he had done to me and how I had released a pent-up dam of multiple orgasms on him in the short hours we had been together. I could barely restrain myself and follow Jennifer out demurely, in a rustle of gowns, when my nipples were so engorged just by the sight of him.

"It's you I really want to talk to," I said softly. "I have to leave in the morning."

Jennifer looked up at me, her brown eyes full of concern. "But you will be back," she began.

I shook my long blonde mane of hair. "No," I said. "And I am going to be taking you with me."

She went very still. Her eyes opened very wide. Like me, she had a fall of hair in her natural auburn color which she pushed behind her ears. "I-I don't understand," she whispered. I was overwhelmed by the beautiful aroma of the perfume her father had created for her.

"Oliver Stillwell," I said, and her eyes opened even wider in stunned surprise, "wants his brothers back on Westmore now that the civil war is over. He asked me to find you, Davert."

Her hand flew to her mouth. "But I'm not Davert Stillwell," Jennifer said, her voice trembling and tears beginning to fill her lovely brown eyes.

I stared at her in disbelief and she began to weep. "Davert was my brother," she wept. "He should have been Jennifer Yost but he pushed me forward in his place. He said it would be easier for me to be a little girl than him. He was fighting with a guard when they dragged him off and took the rest of our draft to the medshells."

It finally struck me. "You're Herall Stillwell," I said and a wretched Jennifer Yost silently nodded her head.

Jennifer Yost did not want to go back any more than Rosemary did. She was dumbfounded to learn that Eddard was still alive and was now a mother and wife. She did not want to go back to her brother, Oliver.

"He hated me," she whimpered. "If he sees me like this, he will laugh at me and humiliate me. You've no idea." I told her what Rosemary had said that Oliver had really wanted.

"Oh, the numbers," she said through her tears. "Well, he's welcome to them if he will leave me alone."

"Rosemary wrote them on a paper," I told her, giving her a tissue and the eyebrow pencil from my purse. Hesitantly, she wrote them down and held them to her heaving breasts.

"If my brother will take these instead of me, I'll be happy," Jennifer whispered. "I want to stay here and dance with Gregory Lannory. I know that I can't ever be a professional ballerina but I would like to, just once, be a proper girl for my parents. They gave me a home and love me so much. They spoil me all the time. They *so* wanted a daughter. They had four sons before they had me. I'll give you the numbers if you'll let me stay as Jennifer Yost and tell no one else about me."

It was easy for me to agree. I only hoped that Oliver Stillwell would. I didn't tell her that, because of her writing them down, I already possessed her numbers. I blotted her face and helped her restore her makeup.

I then did the hardest thing I have done in a long time. I took her out in her bridal dress and put her hand in William McLean's. I saw them both jump as their hands touched and I saw his eyes whip around on to her as he smelled her wonderful perfume. Jennifer was downcast and a little sad and I saw immediately the attraction for him as he put his arm about her slender waist and began to console her.

X. BAD BEHAVIOUR

Rohan said he felt like he was cheating on his wife when I joined him in my biosculpt as Melissa Sutcliffe, still in my bridal gown after the short flight from Greening to his hotel on the Ambergris Ocean. I felt like I was cheating as well as I fantasized that he was William and I was Jennifer Yost. I hope that she enjoyed William at least half as much as I enjoyed my husband. Rohan penetrated me first while I still had my clothes on, his head buried between my breasts as he lapped up my new perfume. Soon he would find out that I had used it all over my body, in obvious and not-so-obvious places. I wanted his tongue to find them all. Luckily, it took him all night but he was good, no, he was fantastic, to the last drop.

Jackie Ivany dropped by with her second little girl and stories about her pregnancy, at Shannondale, where I was learning how to be a mother again. "You don't recall having Joanne, do you?" she asked sympathetically.

I recalled Joanne's birth as a nightmare. I can grasp the idea of implantations and caesarean sections for the babies really conceived in the labs at Lannan and now Coldhaven. I cannot get my mind around the concept that a man could actually have implanted me and that I had had a child just like any other woman. That would make me a woman in every sense of the word.

I shuddered at such thoughts even when Jackie told me how rare it was and that she was only now learning what she had done to me to allow such a thing to happen. Her earlier explanations were far too simple. It had a lot to do with the feminizing drugs they pumped into me at the insistence of my first husband who had wanted me soft, feminine and docile. They used much of that research in their later work which is why rebellions or objections among the treated were now very, very rare. But I knew inside that I was not a woman. I was Willen Smit. Some days, such as when Fiona was being a little tyrant, I also knew I wasn't cut out to be a mother at all.

It was fascinating to see Jacqueline breast-feed Cynthia. "So, I wasn't born a woman," she said, smiling as I watched her, nervously quivering, wondering how it would feel. "Lactation is only a chemical reaction in the body. I know this body so well that I know just which combination of hormones and lactates to use on myself. I am not going to miss again any of the wonderful experiences of being a woman." She cuddled her baby daughter to her who suckled loudly while she smiled in maternal bliss.

"Lady Lannan," I said with a smile. "You said this was a business visit, not one for your pleasure."

Jackie smiled. "Well, I did leave Tarlan at home with Miranda, didn't I?" she asked, mentioning her husband who owed his position as Lord Lannan entirely to her. "Since I am nursing, though, I have to bring Cynthia everywhere with me. I came down with one of the guards who worked the Incurribles Block when your third Stillwell must have been there."

The change in her tone alerted me. This was not going to be an easy interview. "Should I call in Eloise?" I asked and Jackie nodded without hesitation.

I called for one of my new maids, Natalie, to come and babysit while the child slept in the cot I provided. Natalie was small, pretty, with long, golden hair, much of it artificial braiding. Her thin face and small rounded chin made her appear almost a schoolgirl but her high breasts and rounded hips and posterior, accentuated by the pink top and longer dark skirt she was wearing, clearly showed that she was a woman. Several guards were panting after her already. I had told her she was going to the following day's Harvest Ball, not as a maid, but as a guest with the other girls from Shannondale; she had been excited and dreamy all day long.

"She's not from Lannan," said Jackie as we approached my study, the same as that once occupied by my late husband, Lord John McDonald, later Lady Helen Sutcliffe, my co-wife.

"No, Coldhaven," I agreed. "Arrived a couple of days ago, special order."

Jacqueline frowned. She would have asked more but Eloise was opening the inlaid wooden door for us. We went in. I was expecting a man. I was not expecting a young-looking, very attractive brunette. She wore the slim, knee-length black skirt Jackie made her women staffers at Lannan wear. She also wore a long jacket that Jackie sometimes called a smock. This girl had it open, revealing a lovely pale pink and white, shimmering, silk blouse with its silky collar crossed in a feminine bow. She was very pale, her lips a dark red, like her long nails.

She dropped into a deep curtsey in front of me, difficult to do in such high heels. And she didn't wobble at all when I gave her permission to rise and sit across from me at John's large, intimidating desk.

"Gloria Ronyard," said Jacqueline, "has admitted to me that, when she was a guard on I Block at Lannan, she participated in several rapes of prisoners, among many other offences. I bring her to you, Lady Shannon," she used my formal title, "so that you may question her more closely as she was one of the duty officers in the days Davert Stillwell was a prisoner in I Block."

Behind her, I saw Eloise's strong, attractive face light up with a smile. She was my principal agent in tracking down the Stillwells to make good on my promise to Oliver Stillwell to find his three prisoner brothers. Eloise had been looking for Herall, of course, whom she had thought had dropped off the face of the planet. She had only just reactivated the search for Davert and had, it seemed, got Doctor Jackie Ivany, Lady Lannan, to help her.

"The guards on I Block were all male," I said evenly, studying the girl, who twisted her long fingers in agitation. We three former males waited for another to confess that 'she' had once been male herself.

"I-I was," she almost choked and I could see her eyes bright with tears.

"Lady Lannan," I asked Jackie in my coldest voice. "What is the punishment for not cooperating fully in an investigation by the Lord Protector's office?"

“In this case, since it was under one of my programs that Miles Durant underwent nanotech transformation to his present state, the first step before punishment will be to return the prisoner to his former gender.”

“No!” the brunette exclaimed, shaking her long curls. She began to snuffle and whimper. “It-It’s just so h-hard to talk in f-front of real w-women like yourselves. You must think that I am a freak.”

“Why would we think that?” I asked. “We are all women of the world. We have led pampered, cherished lives. We can well understand your envy of us and your desire to be like us. It is a compliment to us.” Gloria stared at me, her red mouth open, showing off lovely, white, even teeth. “But if you want us to treat you like a woman, you must *behave* like one. A woman always has a confidante, one to whom she tells her deepest, darkest secrets. I was married to Lord John McDonald, as you should know. I have just survived an uprising by his cousin, Lady Helen McDonald.” I gave her the cover story, not the truth. “Nothing you say to us, woman to woman, can shock us. I have already told both of my friends of the depravities he forced on me and on his enemies.”

Gloria Ronyard was nodding, almost eagerly as I finished. “I-I was in the tunnels when you-you escaped from Lord John at Lannan,” she said. “I saw him slap you, Lady Caroline, and I didn’t do anything. I was too scared. But I was demoted for a year after that even though Lord John was deposed. When they put me back on the roster, I was in charge of I Block some of the time.”

“Did they explain to you what the incorrigibles had done?” I asked.

Gloria shook her head and bit at her lower, lipsticked lip. “Not individually, though we did know some of the worst criminals by name. We knew that almost all of those sent for the transformations in the first place were rapists and murderers and cowards. Turning them into girls, small, weak and defenceless, seemed like justice to most of my colleagues. Let them feel what it was like to be raped and treated like women.

“Lord John told us of the rampages of the rebels in Lord Carty’s Uprising. He told us how Lord Carty himself had promised girls above the age of ten to his troops and that they had raped the whole town of Stanwich, before the Lord there and protectorate troops put down the rebellion. I didn’t know till years later, in Lord Rohan’s second term as Lord Protector, Lady Caroline, that it was all lies.”

“And you yourself had been living a lie,” I said gently. Brown eyes looked up at me. She nodded but, for a moment, couldn’t speak.

“I’m surprised that you were able to participate in a rape,” I said while Eloise looked at me most uneasily. “I would think that most of the inhabitants of I Block would have been shemales. Isn’t that the term you used for those who were woman-like but had penises?”

Gloria nodded and looked to Jacqueline who was watching her impassively. There was little sympathy there. She turned back to me with a tentative smile, her little feline shaped earrings bobbing against her neck. The only person who pitied her for her plight, in that oppressively dark-panelled office, was me, all blonde and light in my white, flowing dress and pearls.

“Not all of them were shemales,” she said hoarsely, as if trying to get me on her side.

“But you did rape them as well as those who had vaginas,” I said evenly.

Gloria nodded. She looked as if she was in agony, but whether for herself or the luckless prisoners she had been in charge of, I don’t know. I did know that it had taken Jackie Ivany years to root out all the sadists my late husband had employed along with all the dubious ones, who just went along with programs, because it was a job. It was one of the major reasons why comfort inns like the one in Liffey still existed with its preponderance of the popular shemales. I had a suspicion that there was always going to be room for such ‘girls’ wherever there were comfort inns, no matter the planet.

“At first, I didn’t want to,” Gloria said. I didn’t really believe her at all. “But then Allivy, he was in charge of all security, came into the cell where I was with this terrified girl, this shemale, and he took her right in the rear. He said she had to get used to it. It was going to be her trade after all. Then he had me do it. He gave me a lube job so that I wouldn’t hurt myself. I-I remember the other guys coming in as I was tossing her up and down on my pole. Porry, he came over and tore away the front of her dress and was kissing her boobs as I did it to her. She was moaning. Then Porry took her and so did some of the others on the squad.

“She was only the first. Allivy gave me some pills to keep me going and so I went next door with him and we did these red-haired twins. Then we swapped and did each other’s. Those we did face to face and they were so scared of us. They kissed us and clung to us and told us what wonderful men we were and begged us to do it to them again. It didn’t feel like rape at all when they were like that.”

“How many?” I asked. She frowned at the question. “How many did you rape and how many were raped?”

“Oh, *everyone* in I Block was raped,” said Gloria earnestly. “I had some of them several times. Some would fight at the start, then they learned to give up. We let them know they wouldn’t be moved until they learned to do it better. They had to cooperate as women with us. They had to make us both enjoy it. I think they learned to fake the orgasms that we insisted they have. That’s what our job was, Allivy kept telling us. We were making them into women any man on Carmichael would have a good time with.”

“You raped or whatever the crude word is you used, every woman who went through that block?” I asked.

“I might have missed a few,” Gloria said, looking at her lovely stocking feet in their open-toed high heels.

I stared at her, at her full breasts and slender waist. I couldn’t believe her.

“I always wanted to be a girl,” Gloria said suddenly, not looking at me. I could see her eyeshadow and how expertly and femininely it was applied to her face. “As a little kid, I dressed in my sister’s skirts but my Da beat that out of me. The transformations fascinated me. The men were so changed in size. I wanted it to be me in one of the medshells. I wanted to be a woman. But I was so scared that someone in my unit would find out and then I’d be one of those girls, one of the special ones, like that Leodway. He raped the little girls in North Duncan, if you remember.

“Well, he was a cute, little blonde when they finished with him in the Experimental Labs and we had him. She must have been done a hundred times a day on some days, several guys at a time. I remember he had no penis because we’d say things like, how you gonna rape your next little girl, Pussy? That’s what we called her, Pussy. I didn’t want to end up like that.”

“Tell us about Davert Stillwell,” I said and she looked up at me fearfully.

“Who?” Gloria asked in puzzlement.

I glanced at Jackie Ivany, who nodded. “The prisoners weren’t always known by original names,” Jackie said. She turned and spoke to Gloria. “Just before I Block was closed and before I took you into my special volunteer program, you had a batch of prisoners who were not just transformed into women but into very well-known women.”

“Oh yes,” said Gloria. “The lads would come in to the duty room and say, guess what, I just had Danni Colonna, and someone else would say, I had her yesterday, did you know she’s a guy? We had lookalikes coming through that place all the time.”

“And what happened to these lookalikes?” asked Jackie. “What were they used for?”

“Oh, they all went to the Mercer and the Drum Theatres,” said Gloria, “Or the Phoenix. They weren’t as common then as they are today. I saw a play in Duncansford about three sisters, and they were all played by famous actresses from the vids. But there they were on the stage, Danni Colonna, Claire Beaumont, and Madeleine Scott. They came right out in the audience.”

“Could have been anyone,” Eloise put in suddenly, causing Gloria to give her a quick, frightened look. “Biosculpts are all over now.”

“We control them on this planet, unlike Shalimar Station,” said Jackie calmly. “Could you tell that these girls were from Lannan, Gloria?”

Gloria nodded. She flushed. “Claire Beaumont came through the audience, sitting on men’s laps, exciting them, playing the vamp,” she said. “She sat in my lap and got me very excited. Then she opened my pants and pulled out my pecker in front of everybody as she kissed my ear and said, ‘Rot in hell, Durant.’ I had such an erection since I knew she was a shemale and no one else there did. They totally humiliated me, the theatre security, throwing me out of the theatre.”

“You deserved it,” I said, but I kept my voice light and sympathetic.

“I know,” said Gloria. Then she burst into tears.

XI. MUMMY

“What I wanted you to hear,” said Jackie to Eloise and me, after Gloria had been excused to the bathroom with Laura, another of my maids, “is how Davert Stillwell must have been treated in the Lannan that I was working in, so help me, at that very time. Whoever Davert is now, she, I’m sure he’ll be a she, must hate us and be plotting a way to get off the planet, if she hasn’t already done so.”

“We have pretty stringent precautions,” began Eloise.

“There are always smugglers,” said Jackie, “and criminals and criminal disguises, identity theft.” She shuddered. “I hate to say it, but this one might be gone.”

“So what do your records say?” I asked Jackie. We entered the hallway and headed down the stairs to the more comfortable living room. The ruler of the planet, my husband, Rohan Sutcliffe, was on the floor in front of the guarded fire being a ‘horsey’ for my ram-bunctious younger daughter, Fiona, and her two brothers in junior school, Roderick and the quiet, thoughtful Robert.

Megan and Rhonda, nannies, stood by nervously, though they smiled at my husband on whom, like most of the girls I employed, they had a huge crush.

“Rescue me!” called Rohan as Fiona kicked him in the ribs as she had seen Roddy do when he was riding his pony.

“I don’t believe all our records,” said Jackie, smiling as well as the whole brood became a dogpile of tickling and giggling.

“You must have bloodwork matches,” I said. “Test them all, if it takes every dancer and actress on Carmichael. Draw up a profile of blood markers for Westmore. I know there is one for Carmichael because that’s how Nebula Security aimed me here in the first place. Get Colach to help if you must. Peace and security on Westmore through General Stillwell is more in their interests than ours.”

“Mummy! Mummy! Come help me!” called Fiona.

“Boys against the girls!” yelled Roddy, running to me with his fingers wagging as if to tickle me. I swung up my little son and hugged him to me, giving him a big kiss on his soft cheek; his little hands accidentally closed on my breasts as he tickled me.

“We’re outnumbered,” said Robert, pointing to the four women behind me watching us in amusement. I tickled him as I lifted him off my husband who was hugging my daughter.

“If he only knew,” I murmured. I kissed each in turn, saving my longest on the lips for my husband, who somehow wrapped his arm about me as we kissed our younger children together.

With Joanne and Hamish in dormitory school, I had chance to be Mummy to my little children who were also enthralled by little Cynthia and how she was fed by her mother.

“When you have another one, will you feed her like that?” Robert wanted to know.

I looked at Rohan. “I didn’t say anything, I swear,” he said, raising his hands up in the air. “I don’t know where he got it from.”

“Want another girl,” put in Fiona obstinately and everyone laughed.

I bathed Fiona while Rohan attended to the boys. We did that when we were both home and could have a domestic evening. It was nice to be a mummy and read to my most demanding child, put her to bed, be kissed impulsively and be told how much she loved me.

Then, with the boys, it was the same. Robert noticed my new perfume and my new hair styling and told me how much he liked them. He missed me when I was away, he

told me. Rhonda was nice and so was Nanny Hackerty but Rhonda wasn't as pretty as his Mummy.

Rohan was waiting outside and he took me in his arms and kissed me before we changed rooms. "There are messages from Oliver Stillwell and Myra Colach on the console," he said. "And you can tell them both, No. I have proclaimed a new law that my wife cannot leave me alone again with our gaggle of children. Besides, my bed is *so* cold without her."

"That will not be a problem tonight," I promised him. He ran his hands provocatively over my rear and played with my garter belt and panties through my thin dress. I almost purred with the pleasure he was giving me as he kissed me deeply. Then Robert called so we went into the bedrooms and I said goodnight to a very sleepy, smiling Roderick Sutcliffe, who put his arms about my neck and hugged me like his Daddy. I don't think Rohan even realized that we had had a blushing, nervous audience as he had fondled me so sweetly. Natalie, Rhonda and Megan smiled at me nervously from the alcove almost opposite where Rohan had fondled me. I gently closed Roddy's door.

I smiled back and dismissed them with instructions to try on their party gowns for the next day's dance. I told them which young men would take them and bring them home. In between, they could make any choices they liked, I explained. I also told them, quite bluntly, that a few kisses were expected. They went off in a rustle of skirts, blushing and excited, Megan rattling away about them having the handsomest boys at the dance as their dates for the evening.

Stillwell's message was curt. He would accept Eddard's numbers if Eddard was an abomination like Ansell Borbeck. He said his clan needed leaders as much as they needed wealth and power. He expected Davert and Herall to join him soon. I had an uneasy feeling that he was lying to me.

Colach's message was terse. The ranching elite on Westmore had tried to assassinate The General, as Oliver Stillwell was known there. It had split their ranks and made the wounded Stillwell a respected figure on both sides. He had quelled a riot in the Solange and stood down troops one of his commanders had been readying to launch on several unprotected ranches. "Stage-managed brilliantly," was Colach's final, wry comment.

I had known Oliver thirty years earlier when I was a young Willen Smit. I had always liked his integrity and his persistence. I knew he was capable of altruistic acts. I knew he cared for all the people on his world. I had heard him say many times that slights would have to be endured to bring the warring factions on his planet together in a grudging peace. I guessed that in the end he wasn't going to be satisfied with just receiving a bunch of numbers back instead of his brothers.

I thought I was in for more trouble from him if Oliver Stillwell ever found out how my planet had treated his brothers. Then I thought about how I had treated Grother and Rosemary. If Oliver came after me, I'm really not sure who would win. Oh, I was Lady Caroline, and , down the hallway, my husband was coming after me, an expectant smile on his face. Oliver might be stopped by Willen Smit, but Lady Caroline was far too weak to best a man like The General in a fair fight. I would have to fight foul again. After all, I was a married woman. My husband could tell Oliver a thing or two about how I fought. But one

thing I had never been able to do. I had never been able to resist my husband when he came after me.

XII. DOUBLE UP

She was the spitting image of Madeleine Scott. I wore a dark wig and a hat as Eloise took me in to meet Christine Fortune at the Mercer Theatre in the planetary capital of Duncansford. She was at the back of the room, in a very skimpy outfit, powdering her breasts and laughing with a Gina Kolvey lookalike beside her.

She got up quickly when Eloise went to talk to her. She came out past all the feminine bodies, so many in glittery, silver thongs and tasselled pasties, which I guessed was the costume for the first musical number.

"Maddie Scott," she said in a familiar husky voice, nervously extending her bangled arm to me, her impossibly long nails burying themselves into my palm.

We had taken over the manager's office. I indicated where she should sit, across from me. She flounced to the chair and I recalled Madeleine Scott in *Queen of Yesterday*. This girl was playing that part. She crossed her legs and arranged the rigid, rustly skirts of her low-cut, mid-thigh skirts. She had red hair, in long ringlets down her back and her makeup was flawless, down to the beauty mark near her lip that Madeleine Scott affected.

"This is Christine Fortune," said Eloise and Christine pouted at my aide. Eloise had deliberately sent all the men away, guards and employees, although my own bodyguards were very concerned about that. They didn't think that either Eloise or I could protect ourselves, being mere women.

"Once she was known as Ponett Sivell," Eloise said, consulting her notes officiously as if she was a secretary, "and labelled a terrorist by the government of Westmore. She, along with several Westmore prisoners, refused to be loaded on a bus to another part of Lannan and tried to seize a guard's firearm and start a prison revolt. She was stunned, transformed into a Madeleine Scott lookalike, and was raped by the guards in I Block for over two months before her contract was sold to Austen Mercer.

"She was a cellmate of Davert Stillwell who was confirmed as the leader of the riot. Christine has been a dancer and an actress. She does several risqué skits as Madeleine Scott. She often works with a male lookalike of Denardo Risher. They do the complete scene from *Mango* which they do *not* end with a fadeout. They actually do copulate on the stage and charge a special fee for seeing it. Christine will also do the scene in her rooms if you have the credits to pay for it. She has quite a large bank account now."

Eloise didn't add, "Which we could seize if she is not co-operative." But the unsaid words hung in the air and Christine's heavily outlined black holes of eyes flicked nervously from one to the other of us as if she was clearly trying to work out who we were. Mercer had agreed to tell her that we were a new kind of Carmichael police force, women trained off-planet.

Christine got paler and paler as Eloise went on calmly. "Scruffs," Christine said bitterly at last, her brightly painted mouth quivering. "You're scruffs!" I thought for a moment she

was going to spit at us. "You can't take my money," she insisted, trembling. "I worked hard for it."

"If you committed a crime, we can," said Eloise. "Such as, performing lewd acts in public."

"How else in this poxy society can a girl like me get ahead?" Christine flared. "It isn't me you should arrest for that. It's Mercer. He offered me big money to do it. He has to be making lots more. Besides, *all* the lookalike girls do specialty acts. He said that the theatre was a private club and we'd never be charged."

He was right. Christine would never be charged for making love in public or in private. The worst that would ever happen to her would be that some officious militia might take her down to their barracks where they might all take turns having her for free. It was the most common crime on Carmichael after all.

"A girl like you?" I asked, repeating her words. "You think of yourself as a girl then, a real girl?"

"I am," she whispered, her stage makeup making her eyes look twice their normal size as she batted her false eyelashes at me. "I didn't think so at first but now I do. I have men falling all over themselves to take me out and buy me expensive jewellery. I have at least one date every evening with a handsome, loving man. When I retire with Denardo, I will have a biosculpt and we will have our family then. We are both saving for it."

Later, Eloise would tell me that Christine was saving her money but Denardo was frittering away his wages on almost every girl in the chorus line.

"Tell us about Davert Stillwell," I told her. She suddenly looked very afraid. "Isn't it funny that the girl with that identification has blood markers from Frank Downbelow? She has none of the markers that say she was from Westmore as you do. Perhaps you are Davert Stillwell, the leader of at least two prisoner uprisings at Lannan, never mind what you and your brothers tried to do on board ship."

"No, I-I'm not Davert," she said, shaking her lovely hair, her breasts rising in her lovely chest as she came under stress. "I was never that brave. And I don't know where he is today."

"We haven't asked you that yet, have we?" I said gently to her. She stared at me, the fear in her eyes very apparent. "What we should do with this one, my Lady Provost..." Christine gasped as anyone would who had ever been in the hands of the Bloody Provosts. "...is send her back to Westmore. The General wants his brother back and if we can't find him, we can send him Christine at least. We'll let her own money pay for the restoration of Ponett Sivell. He'll be mostly complete, you know, and I'm sure your old buddies will be longing to hear your war stories back there."

Christine stared at me. "Who, who *are* you?" she gasped. "I can't go back. I don't want to go back. *You can't make me.*" Her attempt at bravado collapsed as Eloise took the stunner out of her pocket and calmly, efficiently, set it on narrow-field stun.

"You like being feted and treated as a woman?" I asked her, as she recoiled in horror from the weapon, the most inoffensive of all the weapons we carried. Christine nodded, but I made her say it aloud.

"I love being treated as a woman," Christine Fortune said, her voice shaky.

"Tell us about Davert Stillwell and we'll let you get back to your life as Madeleine Scott," I said gently.

"He was our pilot," Christine said, a quiver in her voice. "He was educated while we were all just speckles. He said to attack the guards and we did. He said exchange identities and we did. He said we had to keep fighting back against the enemy everywhere, no matter how many years it took."

"But he wasn't a man any more," I said gently. "He became a she. *She* said to change identities. *She* said to fight back. Think about it carefully, Christine. Who was 'she?' How did you know it was she, your leader?"

"She looked like Danni Colonna," she said, all in a rush. "Oh, she was so beautiful with that long mane of golden hair as if she had walked right off a movie set. Even the scruffs knew that she was different. She played them off, one against the other. Allivy was her slave, you know, not the other way around. The way he fawned all over her was sickening; she would laugh about it when she came back. She said we could all do it. We could marry officers, get control of a ship, then bomb the planet, or get back to Westmore."

"You didn't go along with that?" I asked, trying to be encouraging as Christine looked at me still with fearful eyes. She gave out little sobs now and then and squirmed as if telling her tale really hurt her. I couldn't tell if she was lying or not.

"There was this gentle boy they pushed in my cell," she said, tears welling in her eyes. "He was very kind and so nice and I, I had my first orgasm. Then there was one of the cooks who was rough but considerate and I felt him so wonderfully inside me. I went into spasm with him and he loved it so much he made me do it again. I was having one man a shift and I was being really loved. They released me to Mercer in Lannan, then Shannon and I got to perform.

"We mingled with the audiences and I got to choose which men I wanted and they paid me. In Shannon, we got to go out and buy our own dresses in the stores there. I was in a play and little girls came up to me for my autograph as Madeleine Scott. We worked with real actors and acted in real plays. I had my first real boy friend, James Rederry. I moved into his apartment in Shannon and everyone, everyone, man and woman, in that community, treated me as a woman. It was *so* wonderful. I was introduced to Lady Helen Sutcliffe once and she was very nice to me as well. She said that she loved Madeleine Scott vids and she promised me that when I wanted to be myself again, and not Maddy, she would help me."

"And Danni and the other Westmore girls?" I asked, trying to keep her on the topics I was interested in.

"There were three Dannis," she said. "One married an officer in the Space Force, another still has her male thing and is touring in Northern, I think, and the other had a bisculpt."

I didn't ask again, letting the silence stretch between us. Christine licked her lips and I could see that she was deciding whether to lie to me or not. I let her think about that for a

while. I let her imagine the consequences for her if she let me leave with a lie. Her stockings, the same color as her skin, rasped as she changed the way she was sitting nervously.

"If you lie," I said quietly, "even if it is to say you didn't know when you did, it won't be us who will be back. It will be the I Block guards who will come and claim you."

Christine, of course, had no way of knowing that I Block did not exist any more. She couldn't have known, either, that the transformations done now by Jackie Ivany were only on 'volunteers,' or so she assured me, the Natalies of Carmichael. Her scouts on Northern found them in every all-male community, Jackie said. Grother's Inn she knew about and had deals with Grother about his working 'maids' and working 'girls,' as her agents had with other Inns all across Northern.

"We called her Melissa," Christine said, her voice very shaky. "She had a biosculpt. She said that Allivy paid for it for her. She sold all the jewellery he gave her and went to a clinic here in the capital. I was living with James then and she was disgusted with me. She said that all of the others had sold her out. She told me that Winbeck had willingly been in a bridal auction and was now pregnant and we laughed over that. We didn't see how it could be.

"But I met Tania a week later and she was just glowing, very much pregnant and much in love. She recommended it for me. Well, she looked like Amanda Spears but she changed her hair color and had it re-styled and did her makeup differently. You couldn't see that she was a lookalike unless you were told. I couldn't do that, of course." Christine indicated her face and her body. "James loved everything about Madeleine Scott so he loved everything about me. It was a wonderful two years."

I let her dream about that for a little while longer.

"And Melissa?" I asked, while Eloise gave me a twisted smile.

"You've got her, haven't you?" Christine said fearfully. "You do, don't you?"

We were mystified. "Lady Melissa Graham, Lady Duncansford," said Christine anxiously. "You scruffs arrested her and her husband after the last Uprising, didn't you? He was on Lady Helen's Council but she was really the brains behind that. He doesn't have a brain in his head. No one in their right mind would ever want to rise up against Lady Caroline. She killed Lord Raines, and Lord McDonald and Lady Helen and Lord Farrelly whom we knew as Tarrant when I was in I Block." She shuddered at the thought. "I-I would, if I ever met her, I-like to th-thank her for that," she ended in a rush. Her eyes were downcast, a violent spasm, like an orgasm going through her.

Christine Fortune had been staring at me for some time, despite all her fear and trembling. I guessed that she had recognized me at last. "We will pass on your thanks to Lady Caroline if we meet her," I said gently. "She would much appreciate your thanks and would wish you, I know, a long and happy life as the woman you wish to be."

"A word of advice," said Eloise then, raising the stunner and expertly resetting the gun to the mildest of stuns, the so-called freeze state. Christine looked at her in sudden, unmistakable panic. "Dump Denardo," Eloise said. "If you want to know why, ask that little blonde number on the end of the chorus line, Justine, what she has been doing in Room Eight, while you are on stage. Be kind to her, though, as it's not entirely her fault."

Christine Fortune looked devastated. "Mingle tonight with the audience as well," said Eloise. "There'll be several men from the garrison at table seventeen. I know you always avoid men in uniform but you might be surprised who the young captain in charge of the group is. You said that there was a young man who was kind to you and gave you your first orgasm. He's been here each day that he could take off to see you. You'll find out... well, I'll leave the rest of that affair up to you."

Christine sashayed off thoughtfully and we came out of the office into a long parade of ravishing blondes, natural and bewigged. They had tall headdresses and swirling half-skirts of different silk colors about their waists. Most of their costume was jewellery and high heels and makeup. They all gave us fixed smiles save for the last, whose blue eyes twinkled. Her breasts bobbed as she began dancing in the hallway. The line suddenly galloped away onto the stage and we heard a roar from the audience. Denardo Risher, or his lookalike, slapped the last girl on her pretty backside and strolled into the artistes' dressing room as if he owned it. He came out seconds later wearing a jar of makeup cleansing cream on his head.

XIII. LADY DUNCANSFORD

I remembered her and she recognized me. This time, I had my head of security and a force of guards with me as well as Eloise and Stella, a true woman who didn't mind carrying weapons and defending the wife of the Lord Protector of Carmichael from her enemies.

Lady Melissa Graham wasn't giggling and whispering in her husband's ear this time as she had been in the basement of Shannondale when it served as a Council chamber and a torture chamber, for me at least, during the last civil war. Some called it Lady Helen's War but it was now being called the Women's Uprising. That part of it was a constant source for vid stories, many of which made my role more heroic and gory than it had been.

I wore long skirts as she did. This was the traditional home of the Duncan Lords after all. I had met and



danced with Sennett Graham, the last Graham Lord Protector. If he had had a living son, I might have been married to him instead of to Lord John McDonald. Lady Melissa's husband might live in St. Duncan's Castle and have the title but he was a distant cousin and a fool.

The Lords in Council after Sennett's death had taken advantage of the situation to change the laws of the Protectorate to elect the Lord Protector for five-year terms. My husband, Lord Rohan Sutcliffe, was the only man so far elected to the office, four times, and he was talking again of quitting and staying home with me and the children. Of course, he also wanted me home and pregnant. Thinking about that, even in passing, produced feelings of deep unease in me again.

What was worse was that when I looked at Lady Melissa Graham, who had tried to convince me at Shannondale that she was an empty-headed, blonde bimbo, I realized that she had fooled me completely. Whose idea was it, I wondered, to have her brought now into the audience chamber of St. Duncan's, ashen-faced, quite ill and three months pregnant. As Lord Benett Graham's only wife, she had had no choice in the matter of being impregnated. Sir Walther Melling, the residing Judge in charge of the treason trials in the capital, had assured me of that. If the judgment went against Lord Benett and he was executed, as seemed very likely, the Graham family would at least have an heir.

Custom dictated that a second ovum had been secreted for the Petri dish where it was fertilized with Graham sperm. It was currently in cryogenic suspension awaiting the resolution of the Graham trial. Poor Melissa! She could be stuck on the planet for two years or more as a pregnant woman. But after that, if she was able to show that she was just the empty-headed blonde I had thought she was, she would be able to inherit a vast fortune and do irreparable damage to the Protectorate. Or she might simply flee from us and go back home to Westmore. A third option was that I could kill her, or have her killed.

I wore my assassin's black dress with its pretty, little puff sleeves. It was very tight and its deep vee from my shoulders showed off my rounded breasts and narrow waist. My hair was parted down the middle, held in blonde ringlets by pretty black and white ribbons at the side of my head. I could, if necessary, get out of this dress very quickly. Though I would be in my garter belt and stockings, I could then move quickly. I loved the feel of my skirts about my legs as I entered the audience chamber. I felt secure as I had my weapons at hand in all the secret pockets stitched into the dress.

I did not curtsy to Lord Benett Graham, a deliberate insult. He flushed and looked to Lady Melissa, confused, as if I was not following the script. I sat down on the wide divan opposite the Grahams.

"Come to gloat, Lady Caroline?" Lady Melissa asked, her high-necked, pink crinoline with no less than seven layers of ruffles in the shepherdess skirts suiting her. Her sleeves were puffed and much larger than mine. I suspected that she was hiding defences from me. Captivity in a place like this was more like being in a zoo than in a prison. Anyone could pass you anything through the bars.

Protocol said that he should have spoken to me first. I recognized the insult. She could, of course, have spoken to a servant first, if she wished.

"I took my husband to the Mercer Theatre yesterday," I said, smiling. "It was a most fascinating show."

"Oh," Melissa said, shushing Benett who had begun to rattle on about how he had gone there often when he was allowed to have his freedom.

"Madeleine Scott is not so much of an attraction any more," I said. "The five girls who do a singing act, the Booty Sisters, I think they were called, a parody of the Beauty Sisters, were incredibly good. Very delightful to talk to as well. Rohan and I went back stage and I introduced him to Madeleine. Well, to Christine Fortune. She's from Westmore originally, just like you. Did you know that?"

That made Benett huffy. "Melissa isn't from off-world," he said, sneering at me. "You got your data wrong on that one, you traitor." He was working himself up into a fine state of indignation. He ranted on about me betraying my true husband and his cousin, not knowing they were one and the same. He went on and on about me being a traitor to the Lords who had welcomed me to the planet and made me the richest bride in history, and about how I had no gratitude, even for that. I let him go for a while so that we both could see and hear what a fool he was. Then I signalled to my security and he was quickly and effectively removed.

I saw Melissa's neatly madeup eyes register surprise at the way my men obeyed Eloise, a woman. I had Eloise clear the room of everyone, save for her, Melissa and me.

"You've been researching me," Melissa said carefully, making no move to pour me tea, as courtesy would have dictated. She would probably try to serve it to me cold, an insult. I might taste it, as courtesy demanded.

"Yes, Davert, I have," I agreed, smoothing my lovely skirts about me.

She sighed. She looked fidgety. "I haven't heard that name in so long," she finally said, adjusting her skirts as well.

It was a relief to know that we were right; Melissa hadn't denied being the one I was seeking. "My husband isn't with me right now," I said with a smile. "You see, this isn't entirely a social call."

"Oh," Lady Melissa said warily.

"One of my husband's jobs, a courtesy of course," I went on chattily, "is to welcome heads of state and foreign dignitaries to our planet. He's en route from the station upabove right now with the new ruler of Westmore." I watched her tense up. "You might know him. Some call him The General. Others call him Oliver Stillwell."

"I don't want to see him," Melissa said savagely, her reaction much like that of her brothers. "He mustn't see what you have done to me. He will start another war."

"You *are* going to meet him," I said. "You will tell him that the investigator Willen Smit has found all three of the Stillwell brothers who were lost."

"Oh!" she gasped in shock. "I tried and tried! How did you... How are they both?"

"Neither wants to go back, to Westmore or to manhood," I stated firmly and the shock on her face was replaced with anger. "They each gave me a string of numbers to give to Oliver which is what he really wants, they said. I trust that you have a string of numbers

as well. Oliver agreed to accept Rosemary's numbers when he learned Eddard had been found. He said he wanted to meet his other brothers as they are."

Melissa bent her head and began to tremble. When she lifted her long golden hair, she was crying. "Haven't you done enough to me on this pox-ridden planet?" she asked in despair. "I never wanted to come here. I would be happy to leave at any time. But you speckles wouldn't even release me into one of your penal colonies on Northern, would you? No, you had to take me and shrink me and do this hideous experiment on me. It's all against every prisoner convention, you know.

"You had the nerve to call me a criminal and say that gives you the right to experiment on my body. So you made me a small part man/part woman, so your guards could beat me and rape me. When I fought back as any man would, I was made into a weak woman then. You transformed me into Danni Colonna, a replica of the most beautiful woman in the world. Gosh, how your guards slavered over me then! How they beat me if I didn't do things for them they thought were erotic. You removed my last traces of masculinity. I couldn't fight back and so I was raped again and again.

"Then you sold me like a piece of meat and saddled me with a huge debt for all the transformations you worked on me that I never wanted. I took the only way out. What did you expect? I became Danni Colonna, what you wanted me to become. It wasn't hard and the men this planet weren't cheated. I learned that I can fake anything. I was an actress for Mercer Theater in the evening and an actress in some Lord or lordling's bed by night.

"Benett Graham was easy to trap into marriage. I would have been one of the most powerful women on the planet if Lady Helen's plot had succeeded, wouldn't I? I saw you, Lady Caroline, manacled to a wall in Shannondale. I can't think how you got free unless you beguiled Connor Raines to unchain you. I thought that my troubles were over but suddenly I was under arrest and then you did the worst of the worst to me, didn't you? You had me impregnated even though I protested and screamed and told them they couldn't because I was once a man. That nurse from Lannan just smiled at me and said that I wasn't the only one."

"I agree with you," I said as her diatribe ran down. "This planet has treated you horribly. Even the compensations, our dresses and fragrances, our orgasms, aren't enough."

Melissa scoffed. "You too?" she asked. "You're another one who thinks that there is some kind of pleasure in having another man stick his thing in you and thrash about on you. There are times when I think I've gone mad and you've all finally gotten to me. I can't believe all the soldiers I led and what they are doing now. My own drill instructor, for goodness sake, is a stripper now in the Flaming Pink Men's Club, swinging nude about a pole and letting every man see how real a woman he is.

"If he would have been my co-pilot, we could have got up above and out of this system but Crystal loves taking off her clothes in front of men. I told her she could be a stripper anywhere but she said Cahan, her boy friend, would miss her since there is such a shortage of women on this planet. I know she couldn't possibly feel like a woman. I should know. I fake it and I don't try to believe it's real like all the phoney ladies you have made at Lannan."

Melissa's hands shook as she reached for the tea and poured me a cup, daintily offering it to me as if cold tea was no insult. I waited as she quivered as she poured for herself. She raised it to her lips and I stopped her, putting her and my cup on the tea tray. I signalled to Eloise. Security had already whispered into my ear that the tea was poisoned. I wondered if she knew and planned to drink it anyway.

"Serving poisoned tea to the Lord Protector's wife is a death sentence," Eloise said, angry as more data came over her ear plug, data I had held back from her.

"Oh, this is marvellous," said Melissa, her voice quivering. "Now you will kill me quite legally and bury me in my skirts and a woman's body. At least, this foul little child of Benett's will be dead as well."

"Actually, he will be tubed," I said carefully. "For you, it will be much like an abortion. He was inside you long enough, though, for everyone here in St Duncan's Castle to know that you are pregnant. The Grahams will accept him as the heir."

Lady Melissa thought about that for a moment. "Then you can do that procedure on me right now," she said bitterly. "But that still doesn't make me grateful enough to intercede for you with my brother. I will make it worse. I won't give him my numbers. I will ask him to take vengeance on you for what you have done to me. I won't make a deal for my life or that of my brothers."

"Sisters," I said and she looked at me wild-eyed, her mascara smudgy about her eyes. "It is more accurate to refer to Rosemary and Jennifer as your *sisters* now. Here are the number sets they gave me." I took a card with the symbols displayed on them. She took it as if it was a grenade-bomb, about to explode on contact. "They should strengthen your negotiating position with your brother, who is just ten minutes away from St Duncan's now. Could you get us some fresh tea, Eloise, and some lifewater, the best stuff, from Mexaca? Oliver has developed a taste for the best since he became Lord of the Solange."

XIV. BROTHERLY LOVE

Rohan escorted his guest, a head shorter than Rohan but much stockier with a markedly more powerful musculature, right into the audience chamber. I rose and curtseyed to both men, as custom dictated. In a short time, while I was kissing Rohan, womanly emotion flooding through me, I heard the rustle of Melissa's dress as she curtseyed to my husband and his guest, her brother.

Oliver, of course, did not know who she was. He was instantly suspicious of me, even though Rohan's arm was about my waist and he was hugging me lovingly. "I don't believe you've met my wife, Lady Caroline Sutcliffe." He introduced me to Oliver, who didn't see Willen Smit in me at all.

I took my husband's hand and led him away with a flirtatious little giggle, saying that Oliver had much to discuss with Melissa, all very private stuff about Westmore. Oliver spun around from checking out the octagonal, sunny room and stared after me. I gave him a feminine wave of my hand, showing off my pink, acrylic nails.

I closed the doors and turned to my husband. Aides pressed in with messages but they all had to wait. With Rohan so near to me, my senses were too energized. I could not do

anything until my husband had thoroughly kissed me and hugged me tightly. If there hadn't been so many people about, I would have shown him how quickly I could have gotten out of my skirts; he could have made love to me on the soft divan right outside the audience room.

"Gavan did it incredibly well," Rohan murmured as I was finally sated from the attention of his mouth. "Stillwell's distorter buzzer is now in my side pocket and he has the fake. Shall we go to the security post and listen in?"

"I'd rather go to our bedroom," I murmured, "or to the back of your black-tinted limousine."

"So would I," said my darling husband, his hands squeezing my waist, my arms about him. I needed nine or ten-inch high heels to be at the right position to capture his mouth. I kicked him; he bent and kissed me again as I put my arms about his neck. It was so much nicer to do that in bed and slide up against him. At least, I got another full kiss, so I was pleasantly buzzed as we retreated to security and tuned in to what was going on in the audience room.

Oliver still did not understand who Lady Melissa was and she was too frightened or humiliated to tell him. Eloise took the place of our comtech who was most disgusted, I felt, at not being able to listen in any more to the audience chatter. He had, however, followed orders and hadn't recorded what had gone on between Melissa and me. Still, my distorters had been on and had worked fine, I was sure.

"Is Willen going to join us soon?" came Oliver's voice over my hooked-in ear plug.

"No," said Melissa uncertainly and we could hear the rustle of her dress as she fidgeted again on her divan. "I have these lines of script for you," she added slowly and we heard the sound of movement again.

"There are only two lines here," said Oliver harshly. "Where is the third and where are my brothers?" He raised his voice as if he knew we were listening in. "I said that I wanted my brothers to meet me here and hand these over." He stopped and there was a long pause.

"Don't look at me like that," Melissa whispered at length.

General Oliver Stillwell swore. "Who are you?" he cried out. He seemed to be genuinely in pain. Rohan and I could hear the whirr of his distorter, he called it a buzzer, in action. It was just a whisper in the background. We could hear everything he said quite clearly. "What are you?"

"They call me Lady Melissa Graham," Melissa said thickly.

"Lady Duncansford?" asked Oliver. "Why would you have these scripts?"

There was a pause again. I could imagine the look he was giving to his former brother. She finally broke. "I-I am Davert," she murmured.

"No, no," Oliver asserted. "I knew Willen would try to pull this trick after the Ansell Borbeck abomination but I will not have it. I will not be laughed at!"

"You will not be laughed at?" she asked incredulously. "You selfish bastard! You piece of tungshed!" I didn't know what that or the five or six other words of Westmore patois that she flung at him meant.

"You've been coached very well," Oliver sneered. "I'd expect that of my old friend, Willen."

"I don't know any Willen," said Melissa in a tight, controlled voice. "I do know that I was in the larrifer," a crawl space for stocking vegetable goods between roofs and upper floors, above water levels in the vast marsh they call the Solange on Westmore, "when Pappa took his belt to you. You had to grip floor supports while he gave you six. You didn't cry and he said he was proud of you. You didn't tell him I was laying on the boxes of tasseil, seeing what he did. You saw me watching you and we've never spoken of it before or since."

There was silence. "You've been coached," Oliver said in a cracked, harsh voice.

"No, I *am* Davert, your brother," Melissa said, the feminine lilt in her voice unmistakable. "You want to know more. Ask me why I joined Hannat's group for flying training."

Oliver hissed something, too low for our recorders to pick up.

"No," Melissa said clearly, her voice thick with emotion. "It was because we were all trained for suicide missions. We all knew that we had just fifteen minutes in the air and then we would be downed by one of the Bright Boys working for the government. Ask me why I didn't care, brother dear? Ask me why I didn't care whether I lived or died or if our share of planetary power was lost forever."

Oliver Stillwell sneered. "So?"

"Pappa gave us each our line to open the computer vault in the Bright enclave at Shevvers," she said huskily, "because he had betrayed us at Ronstead. He had been a Rancher foreman in his early life and they knew. They threatened him and he was weak. That was what you said before you slit his throat and gave his body to the dapples to gorge on. I watched it all. I watched my brother kill my father."

"Now, I have to kill *you*," I think I heard Oliver's strangled voice say.

"Then you'll never get my line of numbers," said Melissa quietly. "I will fight back. I know that I look like a weak woman to you. I am. This is what I was made into. But I won't go out like Pappa and turn my back on you and let you have your vengeance on me."

"But look at you!" declared Oliver savagely. "My brother is a woman. You cannot stand beside me in the Founding Hall and swear the Freeman's Oath. And it would be an abomination," he seemed to love that word, "for you to appear in your frillies," the sneer at her beautiful dress was unjustified, "and take a maiden's vow. I'd not have you sully the clan when word of what you really are gets out. I will not be the laughingstock of both the Solange and the Grasslands."

"My poor brother," she murmured in a low, sarcastic voice.

"You dare!" he screamed at her. "When here you sit in a dress like that and your hair in a woman's curls while you flaunt your woman's breasts before me! I want to puke even

as I look at you. Are you not pregnant also? My brother has lain with a man and been a woman for him! And I would endure the taunts should you ever return home. Our family will be the laughingstock of the world. No, no! It is never going to be. I am going to kill you myself!"

We heard the sound of a chair falling. Rohan pushed the alert button to bring the rush squads of guards to the entrance of the St Duncan's Castle audience room. He stayed his 'go ahead' command as we heard Melissa talking again.

"Help me, Oliver, my brother," she pleaded and we heard the rustle of her skirts and more moving furniture. "Help me!" There was silence and more heavy breathing. "I can have this child aborted. I can be changed back to Davert. It will be long and arduous and ..."

"And you will never be a whole man again!" shouted Oliver Stillwell. "Eddard and Herall are like you, aren't they? These are their lines you offer me. And when you return to Westmore? Women would demand you on the terms we Homesteaders adhere to. You could not be men for them, could you, any of you?" Actually Eddard, or Rosemary, could, if she wanted to be a man again. "Or do I marry you off to my men as their wives? How do I explain to Pelgar, your other brother, that his famous hero-brothers are now his *sisters*? No, that cannot stand. I must end it all now!"

"You are so stupid, Owlie!" screamed Melissa and another chair crashed against a wall. "You deserved that! You don't know where the other two are and you don't have my numbers and you are about to murder a high-ranking member of the Protectorate's court right as a high court is sitting. Come at me again and I might die but you will be dead also within the week."

"I will not be made a fool," Oliver's voice came over our recorders.

"Rattle the door," Rohan instructed our readied forces.

We heard that on our speakers. "We don't have long," said Lady Melissa urgently. "The best deal I can offer is my numbers. I will give them to you and you may resurrect our claim as the last ruling family of the Bright Foundation on the planet. Maybe they'll make you King since that seems to be what you want."

There was silence for a little while, then he groaned.

"Yes, you have to promise to leave us here," Melissa said. "The other two want nothing to do with Westmore any more. And, after meeting you, I can see that I don't, either. Yes, I wanted revenge on this planet for what was done to me and I may still use the threat of you to get what I want. I want off this planet and I want to be me again. I would love to be a brother to Pelgar again but I know it's impossible unless you let him come to me. I can promise you, however, and I will give you a Solange blood vow, if you insist, that I will never, ever return to Westmore or ever tell a soul who I once was."

"The blood vow can only be given between men," said Oliver thickly. A very short silence was broken by the sound of Melissa's sobbing and then, seconds later, by the crash of the doors as our ready force swept into the room and separated the two persons whom none of the personnel involved knew were in any way related.

XV. SISTERLY LOVE

Oliver Stillwell departed Carmichael with three lines of archaic script and a promise to get even with Willen Smit for his brothers whenever the two met again. I shuddered in my short green wraparound dress and told him that my husband would definitely send such a threatening message immediately to Nebula Prime. I hoped that his return would be safe and pleasant, I trilled at him, while he glowered at me.

Oliver kept looking at the men who were playing with the star maps as men do endlessly at the start of voyages. He was trying not to be rude to me, his hostess, and I imposed on him for a little while. "Oh," I asked him prettily as we joined the men, turning from their contemplation of the nebula and the space about it. "Is it true that your world is opting for a constitutional monarchy as its form of government? Will you have elected monarchs as we do here?" The Lord Protector was after all King of Carmichael in all but name. "Or will you have a ruling house of hereditary rulers like Nebula Prime? Rohan and I were wondering about your Royal House since we do have to think soon of a suitable husband for our daughter. We've already had feelers from the Nebula Kingdom about all of our children. Dynastic marriages are going to be the game of the future, don't you think?"

"Joanne could never marry Oliver Stillwell," Rohan told me as we descended later by shuttle to the planetary surface. "Did you mean him to go off thinking that he might? He said that, if things go well on Westmore, and I've never seen Oliver so embarrassed before, he *might* come back with a proposal involving Joanne."

"Don't count on that," I told him, kissing his strong hands. He moved the armrest between us and we were able to snuggle and he could kiss me properly as was only right. I was his wife and I had rights. He had to kiss me and make me feel giddy and feminine whenever and wherever I wanted it.

"You've been talking to Garrison," he whispered. I nodded as I put his hand on my breast so that he could feel how he was arousing me. Garrison was the leading Nebula Kingdom agent on our planet. The word would get back and Oliver's life was suddenly about to get very complicated. I doubted my former bosses wanted a unified Kingdom of Westmore on their colonial flank.

"I'm not sure of this other solution to the Stillwell Problem, either," Rohan said as he let me kiss him, our aides turning away to give us a little privacy. They knew how amorous Lady Caroline was and so I kissed Rohan fervently as we slipped into atmosphere. I had a reputation to keep up.

Lord Benett Graham and Lord Michael Greening, the last of the rebels, had been found guilty and executed even as we were talking to Oliver on station. Lady Melissa Graham had been allowed to repudiate her husband's children. A simple test, not done at Lannan, had revealed that the children were his but not hers. The child she was carrying was 't-ubed' and placed in an artificial incubator, along with the second fetus. The children would be born and would inherit and be raised by other Grahams, but her repudiation meant that she was not Lady Duncansford any more. She was entered into the next open bridal auction in the capital.

I watched it on vid as the Lord Protector led her up on to the dais and paraded her, so sad and stiff, about the stage before the audience in a pale blue gown, signifying that she had been a bride once before. He left the dais before the bidding, turning that over to the new Lord Stanwich, Gavan Borton. His grandfather had finally died before we could execute him for being part of Lady Helen's Plot.

Gavan entered with his wife, Lady Suzie Borton, who was gorgeous in her long, yellow gown, quite eclipsing all the other women there as she smiled in happiness. Gavan gave her a long kiss, reluctantly letting her go as the Lord Protector cleared his throat. There was a lump in my throat as I gazed at my former maid, Suzie. The Willen Smit inside me was insanely jealous of Lord Gavan Borton that he could make Suzie so deliriously happy as a woman. Gavan took on the role of auctioneer at the ceremony.

Austen Mercer, the theatre owner, bid for Melissa, as did several bankers and merchants, clearly thinking that her status as a Lady would help them in being raised to the baronetcy, the new class my husband had created as an outlet for such driven men. The bids limped up to half a million before a new bidder, partly obscured from the vid, caused a stir by doubling that amount. I was watching on split cameras and saw the shock on Melissa's face when she realized who was bidding for her. She shook her head slightly and looked panicked as the bidding stopped.

Gavan was smiling as Suzie came forward to hug Melissa and kiss her cheek. I know she told her that I very much approved. I had sent that message through my husband to Gavan, on to Suzie. The vidcasters were having a field day at the sensation that had been created. They vied with each other for pictures of the beautiful bride, now co-wife to my husband, Lord Rohan Sutcliffe, Lord Shannon and Lord Protector of Carmichael.

They drove through the city and crowds came flocking out at the news. On the steps of the Castle, Rohan stopped where John McDonald had stopped with me, our arms and hands bound by ribbons, as were Rohan's and Melissa's. Rohan kissed her gently as the crowd began to cheer and cheer. Melissa was trembling and very confused when she broke clear and they went in to complete the legal niceties.

Shannondale was in bedlam when they arrived. I had primed the staff, my maids and nannies, the children and all their friends, and our friends from all over the Shannon Valley, to welcome Lady Melissa Sutcliffe into her family. I know that many people were checking me out to see how I was receiving the news that my husband was bringing a new wife home to share the house with me.

They didn't know of course that I had proposed it. We had listened again to the tapes of Melissa and her brother talking. I thought about all that she had gone through in the nanotech transformation and the rejection of her hopes and dreams by her brother. She had stoically tried to go on but the friendliness and welcome we poured on her broke through much of her reserve.

I hugged her as I had very much wanted to do several times since I had met her. I hugged and kissed Rohan as well. She looked puzzled as I snuggled up to him and he extended an arm for her to do the same. Then it was the children's turn and the three youngest let loose in greeting her as 'Mummy Melissa,' which flummoxed her completely.

Hamish and Joanne were also home from school and had gifts for her which we opened at the bridal feast, as we proclaimed it, for just the family, the larger ball being set for the next weekend. I let Joanne know that she could invite her friends and some boys for the evening. I saw Hamish's ears go a little red.

"You should come home as well, Hamish," I said to him, as he gulped over his drink. "You and some friends could arrange some hunting across the Ten Wives Lakes, and, oh, I suppose I should ask some girls from Lady Alice's school." He looked slightly disappointed. "Of course, if there are girls from your school your friends would prefer, well, I'll contact their mothers if you can get your friends to make me a list."

Hamish gave me a shrewd look and blushed slightly. "Thank you, Mummy," he said with a quick smile. "That would be great." Later, unbidden, he gave me a very nice hug and kiss on the cheek as he left to play a table game with some of the staff.

Melissa was roped in for bathtime and bedtime. Fiona cuddled up to her as she did to me, her favorite stories stacked for her reading. "You have nails just like Mummy," she said, admiring Melissa's nails and then her gown, her earrings and hair. She gave Melissa quite a hug and many kisses, then we got the same from the boys.

I had said to Rohan that Melissa had never had any love and friendship in the time she had been a woman. I recalled for him how he had first seduced me gently into accepting that I was a woman. He had enticed me into loving being made love to by him and also all the things that went along with it, like dressing to please a man. I loved all the little things a woman does for a man, and he for her, that makes her feel womanly and wanted.

Melissa watched, almost in shock, as Joanne came to us and talked to me about intimate female things, then about boys. She was full of gossip about which boys and girls were going out and how far some of the girls had gone with their boys. She wanted advice about Corrin and how far she should let him go.

"Do you want him to touch your breasts?" I asked her at one point.

"No!" Joanne said, horrified.

"Then don't let him," I told her. "Wait until you meet a boy you want to touch you everywhere, then go for it. See how it feels with someone you love. It will be really different from being touched by someone you don't."

Joanne agreed, then she hugged and kissed us both before going off to bed. "You, you have a lovely family," said Lady Melissa, looking at me most uncertainly.

"And?" I asked with a smile, putting my arm about her waist and letting our skirts flow together as we went in search of Rohan.

"Why me?" Melissa asked. "Why marry *me*? You know I want revenge. I want anything but to stay here on this planet."

"You can't leave," I said as her well madeup face became a frown, "without making the acquaintance of your sisters."

"You, you'd give me that information?" she gasped in surprise.

"And very much more," I told her. "You are now the wife of Lord Protector. What he knows, you and I will know as well. Such as the fact that I Block is now a matter of history and has been for a while."

"But your husband and me," Melissa said and she actually blushed. "I m-mean," she stammered. "You are a woman and he is a man and, and s-so am I."

I had forgotten that. I hadn't revealed to her yet that she and I were alike, almost.

"I mean you wouldn't want him and me to... well..." she colored even more. "Besides, I figured out why you married me."

"Why?" I asked her curiously.

"Keep your friends close," she said nervously. "But keep your enemies even closer."

I laughed. "To show you how wrong you are," I told her. "I will let you in on a secret. It didn't work with Lady Helen, did it?"

"She wasn't always your enemy," protested Melissa, frowning and pushing back her mane of golden hair.

"Lady Helen was once Lord John," I told her and gave her a brief history of my first co-wife and former husband. "So keeping an enemy close wasn't the reason why we married you. Besides, you didn't make any demands on Oliver Stillwell, did you, but to be allowed to stay here. And staying here, for you, means marriage. A woman of your station can't become a comfort girl or a stage dancer, like Cindy Fortune."

"Nor a woman like you," Melissa said sourly.

"Another secret," I told her, "and this one we kill to keep." She opened her painted mouth and I told her that I was Willen Smit and I was now a woman, just like her.

"You *can't* be," Melissa gasped, her hand at her pretty mouth. "Twenty-two million! You fetched that price at your first bridal auction. I have followed you through all the beauty and news magazines. You are the most admired woman on the planet and your husband adores you. Everyone knows that."

"Yes," I said. "And I love him just as much." She looked troubled. "But we've always known we would have to have another wife in the family. I have business which has taken me off the planet for years at a time in the past. Helen was great with the children, when she wasn't trying to have them killed, that is."

"I *can't* be a mother to your children," Melissa said and I could hear the panic in her voice.

"Of course not," I agreed. "We're not after a glorified nanny. We can get those from Lannan. You saw our girls at supper. Natalie is marvellous with the young ones. And Margaret Hackerty organizes the nursery so well. I don't want her to marry and lose her services but she has it really bad for one of our guards, as does Natalie. I think we will be arranging their bridal auctions very soon. And thinking on that, this is the first night of your marriage, isn't it? Tonight, as a treat, you get Rohan all to yourself."

But it didn't work that way. Rohan was kind and gentle and seduced her as he had me once upon a time, and Melissa had her first shakes inside. It took another round with Rohan before she let go entirely and had what she knew was an orgasm, her first as a

woman. She sobbed then for what she had done to me, confining me to a lonely bed, or so she said as she wept. Rohan, of course, told me. And so it was, that the happy couple sought me out. Rohan had what he called every man's dream, two willing women in bed with him.

Somewhere in the night, our caresses became so intimate that I found myself kissing Melissa while Rohan was in me and his mouth was on my breast. It wasn't at all like it had been with Helen when she touched me. I had not liked that but then she *had* been my ex-husband. With Melissa, it was different. We were both focussed on Rohan, after all. The gentle touch of her hand only aroused me to want Rohan to take me.

When Melissa came, in great emotion and joy, I was glad to hold her and hug her just as I did Rohan. She encouraged me as I made Rohan do me all over again. He proclaimed his love for us both as we went to sleep in his arms, two blonde heads burrowed into Rohan's shoulders.

We bathed together. We played together. In a week, Melissa murmured to forget everything she had ever said about going back. She was a woman forever, she said, as we lay out on our sun chairs in our black bikinis. The sneaky children attacked us with water again, saving most of their attacks for their new favorite mother, 'Mummy Missy'.

Disengaged from happy, squealing children, the drying being left to the nannies, we went upstairs to our shared bedroom to dry off our hair and get ready for the ball.

"There are drawbacks," I explained to Melissa. My hair was going to take hours and I was going to have to come up with a new style as my perm was ruined.

Melissa giggled as Rohan came in and caught us in panties and stockings. He stopped beside her, put his arms about her thin waist and caressed her bare breasts. She raised her lips and melted into his arms as he kissed her. She went eagerly with him into the dressing room and the couch there for a romp before she got changed while I struggled with my hair.

Melissa bathed while Rohan came to me and had me on our bed. My stockinged legs were high over his back as he rode me for an age. He made sure I was not neglected in any way by being second to be taken.

"There are compensations to the drawbacks," said Melissa later as my hairdresser fastened my hair in a tight bun on top of my head. She worked on my makeup and Melissa helped, as if she was my maid. Our hairdresser left with a smile that we seemed to be getting on so well.

Impulsively, Melissa gave me a hug, our breasts touching as she kissed me fervently. Diane had left to tell the citadel how well we got along. Then Melissa was off in her long, rustling gown with Rohan. She was so young, fresh and womanly innocent, despite all the horrible things that had happened to her. Rohan, I could tell, was finding it a pleasure to take her and teach her about love and cooperation. Goodness, *I* felt her femininity as well. I wanted to load up and be Willen Smit again and take Melissa. But, of course, if I was Willen, she would never have given me the time of day. I sighed as my hairdresser returned to complete the curling of my bangs. Diane sniffed as she worked again on my hair. She still had some of her mannerisms from the time when she had been a male hairdresser before 'volunteering' for a program at Lannan.

Diane gossiped about her three boy friends and wondered how she could ever settle down with just one man. She gossiped about all the women in Shannon that she served and told me which men my girls seemed to be sweet on. She praised Melissa to the skies. She was just like me, she enthused. If we both wore the same colors, and if I let my hair grow a little more, we would look entirely like sisters.

I might yet come to regret the day I had urged my husband to buy a co-wife so that he wouldn't be lonely while I was away. Rohan had said to me that he didn't like that I was preparing to leave him again. He came to find me and we retreated to the 'old' study on the attic floor which had a most comfortable couch and was not on any security net. I had programmed our security buttons to show us demurely discussing household reports in the main study.

"You are going off on me again," Rohan said as he held me close and fell with me on the couch. I wasn't able to talk for a while as he kissed me ardently. So much for my fresh lipstick. I wriggled from him and did a slow striptease out of my outer clothing, the heavy dress falling to my feet. He had taken off his underclothes as well. He had a huge erection, probably chemically induced. But he liked to take off my jewellery and my underclothes and stockings himself. I let him as his 'thing' caressed my thighs, making me tingle all over.

"I am doing no such thing," I teased breathily, enjoying every caress about my panties. "You take so many set-you-ups that you need more than one wife, right here on Carmichael."

"I only need them when you are home," my husband said, slipping my bra straps down my thin, soft-skinned arms, bringing me out in goose bumps. "I've never heard of any woman who comes like you do, who wants to be taken as much as you do. I hope it's because you're storing it all up from when you are away."

"I do," I protested as my bra left my body and he began to kiss my breasts.

"I understand, though," Rohan said later after I was thoroughly taken. My legs were about him as he slowly pumped me. I trembled and caressed him, having again come several times to just his one. "Melissa is just like you, save for one thing. She will stay here, won't she? Are you planning something so dangerous now that you might not be back next time?"

"I'm planning nothing," I gurgled. His caresses grew more urgent as I began to wriggle and activate every part of my body which always made him crazy.

"I'm embarrassed to say," he went on, letting me get on him and tantalize him even more, "that I am in love with her, half as much as you, and I think she has fallen heavily in love with me, with both of us actually. She can't wait to meet her sisters, by the way. She'd even like to meet her other, younger brother on Westmore, but I doubt Stillwell would allow that."

"I love her as well," I said, letting him kiss my breasts, then my entire body, "but not half as much as I love you, Rohan."

Rohan believed that. He believed that I loved him so much that I was making sure that he would never be lonely when I left on one of my 'adventures.' Such was the man I loved.

In a way, he was right. Lady Myra Colach, Duchess of Galloway, had been bombarding me with reports of missions I should have undertaken for her. Her last, "I'm not getting any younger, you know, and it is time to train my successor," had made me shiver and have the willies for nights. No, I never wanted to leave my loving, wonderful husband. But I had pledged that before.

We finally were sated and we came down to find Melissa romping in the garden in some kind of football game with a laughing, actually laughing, Hamish and several of his friends. I knew that I would not have to worry ever again about coming home. Not when Melissa turned, saw us, and danced over to us, a delighted smile on her face.

"I'm *so* glad Rohan found you," Melissa beamed at me, and she actually winked with pleasure. She glanced back at the boys, who had now inveigled Joanne and some of her girl friends to play. She lowered her voice. "You were such a long time gone, I thought it would be good to get the boys and girls playing as well."

The girls, being in dresses, were hardly as competitive as the boys, but the boys were courteous and involved them as well. Melissa, despite her high heels and skirts, had been surprisingly effective and had, according to Hamish, scored all his team's goals. He wanted her back.

Rohan put his arm about her waist and hugged her to him as he was hugging me. "You only get Lady Melissa," he called to Hamish, "if you take Lady Caroline and me as well. It's a package deal."

The teenaged children looked at the three of us and exchanged low-voiced remarks that brought grins to many faces.

"I'll take that offer," said a smiling Hamish, and we invited some of the guard and the maids to join us. It was indeed a package deal. I didn't intend to ever change it. I didn't. I wanted the bliss I felt to go on forever and ever. But we don't always get what we wish for, even in the most modern of modern worlds. I just had to be content and enjoy the moment. Luckily, it lasted five years.

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