



Reluctant Press presents:

The Princess 2

Philippa Peters



ILLUSTRATIONS BY C. HAIGHT

AN 'ADULT TV' E-BOOK

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THE PRINCESS 2

by Philippa Peters

The second and final part of *The Princess* continues after the eight chapters of Part One.

IX. SHADOWS OF THE PAST

PALLAY. Tamsat prospered as it never had before under the rule of its lovely, lonely queen. Perhaps the reports of both were exaggerated for Pallyay did have her court of maidens, many of whom she had saved from the ravages of cruel pirate captains, as her share of the loot from many a raider. She also married, for short times at least, several of her captains, before the survivors understood that marriage to Pallyay was also a death sentence.

Her fame, however, the accounts of her loveliness, and the fact that she had no husband, all lost nothing in the retelling. The powerful warlord, Guthurn of Timilly, was enticed by many reports of the red-haired 'Flame Queen' to bring his forces against hers. He brought an army over the so-called impregnable Tammick Mountains and lay siege to the port in the eighth year of Pallyay's solitary reign.

Guthurn offered only one term for breaking the siege: Pallyay's hand in marriage. She refused, appalled she said, by his crassness. When starvation threatened, however, for Guthurn had stationed guns to bombard all ships that approached to break the siege, the Council of Captains met in secret, ordered their Queen bundled up in her nightclothes and thus delivered her and the city to Guthurn.

Guthurn was an honorable man to some extent. He looked upon the red-haired, enraged Queen, clad in the green silk, which she wore to bed, and proclaimed that he had captured the greatest treasure of Tamsat. He set a marriage feast for the following day and forced Queen Pallyay, still in her green silk, to marry him.

She continued to resist for a time and was carried struggling into Guthurn's tent. He was not long in his wedding bed when he cried out and killed the lovely Pally. He ordered his troops to pillage the port of Tamsat, rendering it to the fishing village status that it has today. Though it was never proven by another, we have to take Guthurn's word for it that the lovely Pally, Flame Queen of Tamsat, five times married to lusty men, was indeed a man herself. (From the history text, "The Pirates of Tamsat", written by Helena Meravon.)

We made a great show of parting, my husband and I, with much kissing and affectionate hugs for the cameras before I left for Niccobi and he to the so-called 'peace talks' in Matona. I was able to contain my revulsion well for he could not strip me and put his hands in my panties as he had done several times earlier in the day, to my great shame. I was back under the control of Lady Atara, as everyone now called her, even the Storm Guard Undermarshal who accompanied us to the citadel in Niccobi, through crowds of cheering people out to greet me 'coming home' after my bridal tour.

I felt such a fraud as I left the carriage in front of the steps to the citadel, dressed in my Therentian short dress, which flowed about my knees, showing off my black, silk stockings and shapely woman's figure. I had still to complete my bridal tour with day visits to Niccobian families but at least I was finished travelling before I went into seclusion. I waved to the crowd, well aware that I had to stop to let Lady Atara catch her breath, for she was the one who was actually pregnant.

I knew that was why she had left me to my husband's not-so tender mercies in bed the previous evening. It was hard to think of that and not flush in shame at the things he had me do. Yet, I felt womanly in my new style of dress, my hair flowing about me. The bobble of my chest was unnerving as well. On my long trip about Therentia, I had grown breasts, real woman's breasts and my husband loved me so for that alone. She, Lady Atara, could have saved me the degradation my husband had put me through if she had wanted. She was, after all, his concubine and a woman. I was only his wife and a *man*.

She ordered my maid, the Stertian mute, to take my clothes to the Queen Jerna's Suite where I had been held prisoner before and taught to behave as a woman. It was now so ingrained in me, like walking with a graceful feminine sway in my high heels, that no one questioned whether or not I was a woman. I did not question it myself. I was a *woman*. I knew it now.

Inside my familiar rooms were the mirrors, training mirrors as Reneth, the real corrupter of my will power, had called them. I stood and studied the blonde woman who had entered the rooms and looked for flaws. I could find none. My hair was in a thick, golden braid over my shoulder. I shuddered, recalling it floating free about my face as my husband had kissed me the night before at the start of making love to me. He loved it and the scent I was given to wear. He tortured me by having me do to him all the things I had done before under the influence of Reneth's drugs. Then he did to me what he said I enjoyed most as his woman. I shook just thinking about it and how I had succumbed in my fright to everything he, my husband, wanted.

I had a staff of three beauticians to work on me so that it was little wonder that on my face, the ravages of the previous night were well concealed. The injections that Zadmer, my physician, gave me regularly probably accounted for the smoothness and roundness of my face. They certainly accounted for my breasts, the thickness of my lovely hair and my female figure. I studied my cleavage, quite natural for a woman, my dark bra invisible beneath the dark blue folds of my dress.

My husband loved my breasts. He had fondled them and kissed them repeatedly as I betrayed myself by responding to his attentions with a hardening of my enlarged nipples. He thought I did it out of female love for him, not out of the fear and shame that any man could treat another so.

He loved my roundness, too, and how my artificial disguise made me fit to him as a woman, but he soon removed that during his rape of me. Yes, it was rape, for I did not consent to be assaulted in that way by a man who claimed he was my husband. He had me put on stockings and a garter belt and stroked and kissed my legs as a man would a woman. He entered me with my legs up over his shoulders, his kisses along my thighs enervating me and making me gasp. He loved it that I was weeping when he entered me.

He took me from behind, with me arching my back, my face buried in a pillow, while he had his way with me.

Then he had me kiss him and tell him that I loved him and what he did to me. The vivid dreams I thought I had, which must have been when he kept me in a drugged state as his sex slave for so long, helped me to get through it all. Reneth's voice still seemed to reverberate in my head with instructions so that I knew what to whisper when.

It only made it worse, though, that Gendrick took all my utterances as the truth and rewarded me with even more lovemaking, treating me, absurdly, as a wife who loved him and was willing to do anything to help her man achieve pleasure in sexual congress with her. He knew then that I was not drugged and he whispered that I had never been so loving as I tried to make him come a third time, his encouraging, stroking hands actually making me forget for moments at a time that I was a man. Then he cuddled me after he finally came, as if I truly *was* his devoted wife, and he told me how much he loved me and that he never intended to sleep with Atara again, not when he had a wife like me to pleasure him.

Lady Atara sat at the console and didn't release the constrictions of her dress until the last of the Guard, carrying my dresses' containers had left. "Tea," she ordered the mute, who nodded and left immediately. It was she who had opened my dress in the car so that my breasts would be visible to the crowd; I would have been humiliated even more if I had made a scene.

"I know what you and Zadmer have done to me," I said as I sat beside her like a woman. I smoothed my rustly dress beneath me and crossed my legs; the stockings made a familiar rasp, one I loved to feel. I had learned the pleasures of being dressed as a woman. "I know what he plans for me as well."

It was frightening when my husband took my male member in his hand as we lay together, the artificial disguise about my male parts cast aside. He had been only partly awake when he said that I didn't need it any more and we should have Zadmer remove it,

as he had done to the others. Then I would have even greater pleasure by receiving him not through a plastic opening as my artificial vagina provided, but right into me. What did I think of that?

I had trembled so much that I nearly contradicted him, which I had seen Gendrick the Mad hated. Somehow, I thanked him for the thought and agreed with him that his pleasure would be greatly increased. I told him I loved him. He began kissing me again and got so roused that he tried to take me again but fell asleep during the whole process; I was left to sleep across his chest, as he told me he wanted me to. He wanted to awaken with me aroused to service him right away in the morning. Which I did.

"What is it, my dear?" asked Atara, calmly.

"I want the process stopped," I said, opening my dress and lowering my bra so that she could see how large and femininely shaped my breasts were. "I want this reversed. I want no more injections."

I had lain beside Gendrick in fright all night as I trembled at what he had said about 'the others'. I had seen Helena, a former cadet named Detter. She had been experimented on before me and I knew there were more like her somewhere in the Citadel. Gendrick had implied that the experiments were still going on and that they had removed the manhoods of my poor fellow cadets. I didn't want it to happen to me. *I did not want to be a woman.*

Atara frowned. "Very well," she said. "Have you thought that we could give you maintenance doses in your drinks?"

I glared at her. That was how they had done it to me when I learned to be Gendrick's wife in bed. I had been in a stupor most of the time; mesmerized into thinking I was really a woman and a wife.

"I would have thought that you would want to continue the injections," Atara went on, studying me as I put my breasts back into my bra and closed my dress. "You have enjoyed the bridal tour so far, haven't you? It isn't bad to be treated as a Princess, is it? You couldn't have enjoyed all those revels with the Life Corps officers if it hadn't been for Zadmer. Believe me, Gendrick will soon tire of you sexually. You see, you are a novelty to him right now. He just loves the idea of making the one who should be King service him as his Queen."

"Shut your lying mouth!" I screamed, almost hysterically, just as the mute returned with tea. She set it down and regarded us both doubtfully. I was quivering with rage.

"This-*this* is how your plot works," I jeered at her, so cool and poised, not one of her white hairs out of place in her neat, chignon hair styling. The mirrors showed two lovely women taking tea, everything about me the equal in feminine elegance to her, from my high-heeled shoes to my braided hair. "How-how can I survive when it would be easier for him to have me killed?"

"You will not die, Princess," she said to me forcefully. "You can see that I am pregnant with Gendrick's child and it is my child who will be proclaimed as yours and sit on Gendrick's throne." That was the plot that she had devised with the Lord Marshal of Theren-tia, Lord Chasmun.

"I know," I sneered. "You've planned all along for a concubine's whelp to sit on the throne of Niccobi."

"Yes," said the ice-cool Atara, her voice suddenly very angry. "My whelp. That's how all of you born in the blood think of us, isn't it? We are of such little account that we scarcely rate as humans."

Her pale eyes flashed at me. "But I have feelings, my beautiful Princess," she said bitterly. "And ambitions. I care for my child, even now. It shall not suffer as I have suffered."

She motioned me to sit down and I did, smoothing my skirts beneath me femininely, the airy feeling of my dress and the motion of my chest such old friends now as rarely to be remarked upon by my brain.

"I was born in the pits of Almance," said Atara softly, gathering my attention again. "When Gendrick overcame the last of the Alman Barons, we greeted him as a liberator. His rule, you see, is that much gentler than that of the Baronger Werrens who owned me. My own mother was bred so many times by him that I was lucky that she survived to raise me. Four of my brothers did not survive.

"I was earmarked, because of my paleness, for special breeding. My Baronger kept me celibate, knowing he could obtain a high price for me, the older I became and still a virgin. Gendrick had Werrens cast into the deepest of pits, among the black-earth slaves. I'm told he screamed for days as they slowly devoured all the parts of him.

"I became Gendrick's chattel, then his concubine. He has never possessed my soul and he knows it. Death would just be a welcome release for me. He intends that when my child is born that I will learn to fear for it, as I cannot fear for myself. Then I will be lost."

She looked at me and I retreated along the sofa from her bleak look. "Gendrick only wants what he does not fully possess," she said. "He didn't fully possess you under drugs. He will soon possess you entirely as his loving woman. We both know that. Stay alive, Princess, and you and my child may yet survive the assassination of Gendrick the Mad.

"Yes," Atara nodded at me; fright filed every part of me at her words. "He will be assassinated, sooner or later. All tyrants are. His dream of a new Vesian Empire with himself as Emperor and you possibly as Empress is a mad one. Chasmun and other Therentian Lords know where the Storm Guard should be employed, against the great barbarian kingdoms of the North and East, not in the decadent South."

Atara sipped her tea and gestured to me to take another cup. "I must admit," she went on, in the same unemotional tone, "that I had hoped with your breasts would come some maternal feelings. My child will need every friend and benefit he can receive in his first few days of life, because that is coming sooner than Gendrick or anyone else expects. In one hundred days, in fact."

My eyes must have mirrored the shock I felt. "I cannot be mother to your child," I blurted out. "I cannot be that. It's impossible!"

Atara shook her head wearily at me. "Oh, my Princess," she said. "Have you not learned yet that, in the world ruled by Gendrick the Mad, nothing is impossible?"

Atara insisted that I not be cooped up immediately in the citadel to UnderMarshal Bregg, the Storm Guard commander. We had to complete the bridal tour, she insisted, and inevitably, that led us to Ashun.

"I don't understand why we are coming here," I said more in dread than anticipation as we drove up to the house where I had been raised. Lady Cadella had taken it over after the death of my father. It was our sixth excursion of the Harvest season, as Atara seemed determined that I visit every house and estate in Niccobi that had not been present at my wedding.

"Ashun was once your home?" Atara asked with a cynical smile. "We'd better not say that to anyone we meet here in the next few days. As far as the Steward is concerned, you are visiting on behalf of Lady Cadella. He sends her accounts and you are here to verify them."

My stomach lurched as the crawler turned along a familiar, dusty road. The estate looked untouched by the ravages of the war. I couldn't help it; a tear came to my eye as I thought of myself in my army uniform, returning as Lieutenant, or even Captain Buron Osterick. I half expected my brother Juton to come running out of the manor door to welcome me home.

But I was returning as a woman, in long, flowing dark-red dress, my hair styled into braids and falls, the jewel of my rank as princess across my forehead. I quaked as I was helped from the car by a younger officer who could have been me before I became such a woman as I was. I saw his eyes on my breasts, so I was flushing as the main door opened.

It was the white-haired, balding steward, Gerderas, who came out of the sandstone-faced Great Hall as our car halted on the crushed-brick driveway. The scowl on Gerderas' face as he took in the Therentian markings on the crawler and the uniformed guards that went everywhere with me showed his feelings at our visit.

"The manor-estate of Ashun, home to the Osterick branch of House Ospero," Gerderas began pompously, "bids ..." He stopped as Atara lifted the veil from my hair and face to protect me from dust and he saw me. He gargled and stepped backward.

He recognized me for sure, I thought, my heart beating faster, not knowing whether to be relieved or embarrassed.

"Hello again to you, good Gerderas," I said shakily, my voice the Princess Rina's but the words the familiar greeting of my father whenever he returned home.

"Lady," Gerderas said stumbling as he tried to bow. "Majesty, if I had known that you travelled in, in this, this ..."

"Accursed Therentian contraption?" suggested Atara coolly.

I bit at my lipsticked mouth, shivering in my long dress, feeling it flick against my stockings, reminding me that I was a woman now. Gerderas had recognized me as a woman, I thought in chagrin, not as the former squire of the manor.

"Majesty," Gerderas addressed me with a low bow and then nodded to Atara. "We have had no one in residence here since Lord Buron was killed in the siege. Ah, such a sad loss." He looked so upset that I wanted to reach out and tell him the truth right there. "Perhaps you saw him at the fall?" he added as I nervously withdrew the gloved hand I had extended to him.

"Lord Buron?" asked Atara with a frown, as all I could do was to shake my long blonde hair at his entreaty.

"Well, his father died on the Outer Wall, we did hear that," he said, making no mark of respect to Atara as if he knew of her as a concubine already. But he seemed to know how my father had died. It was more than I had heard and I longed to pursue the topic with him. "So, even though it was only for that last few days, well, Buron was a Lord, wasn't he? No one was more deserving."

I thought I would burst out of the tight, shaped gown I wore. I had to stand there as our old steward explained that though I was a might headstrong, my father had looked to me to be a great lord when my time came.

"Geray and I were glad to see you had Lady Cadella's daughters as your flower girls," he said, leading us into the Great Hall. He said it so innocently that I absolved him mentally of any dark deed in turning my brothers into flower girls. He quite clearly didn't know it was them. "She came, you know, right after she heard of your death. Took possession for her and that Tugron, or whoever it was she married."

I found it difficult to mount the old stone steps, worn smooth by children's running feet over the years. His arm steadied me as we entered and crossed the old flagstones, the cracks and joins trying, or so it appeared, to catch my high heels at every step.

"All you pretty ones must wear such impractical shoes, mustn't you, Princess," he said, a sly smile on his weather-beaten face. "Here's Geray. She's not learned yet what's right to wear on her pretty feet, either."

I was certain that my heavily beating heart must clearly be heard or even seen in the amount of exposed bosom I was showing in the tight, shaped upper part to my dress. It felt even tighter now as I turned to face the girl who had taught me how to make love to a woman, who had praised me as a young man, and who so loved being a woman herself.

Geray was shocked to see me. "Oh, fathermine," she said with a smile, curtsying to each of us in turn. "Our future queen may walk as she wishes without scold."

Again, I felt a pang, as I was not recognized, this time by a girl I had lain with many an afternoon in Heat and Harvest in haystacks and hay lofts, her friends covering for her in the kitchens while she and I learned how to make love.

"Were there not younger sons here too?" asked Atara of the steward while Geray, looking as pretty as she had always looked in her long, loose, Harvest dress, offered us seats at the foot of the fireplace, with its familiar banners flying overhead. I felt other pangs too as I saw familiar chairs, books, objects, carefully put away in nooks and crannies I knew well.

"Lady Cadella took them off to Opar to be with her family," Gerderas said in disgust. "Packed Tugron off with them, we heard."

Geray nodded. "We didn't know she was married, my princess," she said earnestly to me. "Nor that she had daughters, either. She kept them in town though we urged her to bring them on out here after the boys were gone. But she said she had to go. The Theren-tians wanted to lock up all the Ospero minor houses, she said. So we never got to see her daughters save at the wedding."

"Very pretty little girls," mumbled Gerderas, while I wanted to ask him angrily how it was he couldn't tell that the little girls were *not* little girls but my brothers whom he had seen almost every day of his life. "Real Ostericks in looks, too. Thank goodness they took after her and not him."

"Well, that affair is over now, thanks to the Princess," said Atara. "You render accounts to Lady Cadella in Opar, do you not? She requested us to check your accounts while we were here."

"Just like her," snapped the old steward angrily. Then he looked at me and tried to apologize to me as I saw the Guards spring to attention close to me. I waved them off but they looked at him very suspiciously, as I supposed they should.

"Geray will be maid to both you ladies, my Princess, my Lady," the old steward said when he realized we were yet on my bridal tour. "It will be an honor for her, Majesty."

"Yes, of course," said Atara quickly. "The Princess will be delighted to have Geray attend her. My mute may attend me this evening."

I longed to protest but Geray was smiling so brightly with pleasure that I couldn't reject her. I had seen that smile often, as she lay beside me, teasing me until I had fallen in with whatever her wishes were. I ached inside my panties and my breasts felt sore as I looked at her and realized that at that time, I had truly loved this girl.

Crossing my legs as we took tea only made the feelings worse, since every nerve in my body was on edge, supercharged with emotion. Undermarshal Bregg ended my contemplation by suddenly bursting into the hall with a comset and announced that the Lord Sovereign was in Niccobi.

Atara drew me with her into an alcove to speak to my husband. "We are fulfilling your wife's royal duties," stated Atara to Gendrick's frowning visage. "We can not leave so curtly without giving great offence. Besides, you are supposed to be in Matona. Surely the peace negotiations haven't broken down that quickly."

Gendrick shook his head. "You did your work too well, Lady Atara," he said softly and I felt chills go up and down my spine. "I have one night to see my wife in seclusion before the League presents its credentials tomorrow. I come to Niccobi to make love to her and she is not here. I want to make love to my wife tonight. Bring her to me right away."

He spoke very calmly but shudders ran up and down my spine at his words.

"That must come later," insisted Atara and his eyes hooded suddenly and he looked like he was in pain. "You must see that we cannot leave, now that we have begun our visit. She must be presented to House Osterick tonight. Stay one more night in the citadel."

"Impossible," he stated, in a tone to match her at her iciest.

“If you contact Reneth,” said Atara, “there’s a new young girl, a new concubine, fresh from Goberaint. She is said to look much like our future Queen.”

Gendrick had, however, already cut the contact. I looked at Atara, the fear showing on my face. “He might come here,” I gasped, looking across the hall at the pretty, dark-haired girl who waited to attend to my feminine needs.

“Not even he would dare to breach etiquette in such fashion,” she said. “Don’t worry your pretty little head about that.” She began to make another call. “I must keep him occupied for the rest of the season.” She ordered me away to Geray just as I saw Lord Chasmun’s face appear in her comset.

X. GERAY

CHOLLIN. The islands of the Tavasail Channel have never been able to support human habitation in any numbers. Windswept for the most part, they are a trap for vessels trying to pass around the continent of Landsouth by the ‘quick’ route to Buch and Merranal. Chollin must have been a child aboard one of the unlucky vessels that met a quick demise in the shifting shoals that make the Channel so treacherous.

The ship, ‘Allinn,’ trying to bring Catal tea to Opar to reap the benefits of high winter prices, was forced to shelter in the Tavasails. Grounded off an unknown islet, it was as much a shock to her crew as it must have been to Chollin that the two caught sight of each other. The tall, dark-haired figure in a dark blue dress had come down to the sea to check crustacean traps.

Chollin could barely speak, beyond the ability to say ‘Chollin.’ The captain of the ‘Allinn’ took the figure to be a girl right away. She had long, wavy hair, a ribbon tying it back most prettily. Her face was thin and smooth, reddened by exposure to wind and sun. The dress she wore fitted her as if she had some female attributes. Little could the captain have known that in the wreck Chollin had lived, she had clothed herself with what would fit her, padding where she had to, so that nothing was loose or slack. She had no idea of man, woman, boy or girl and was, in fact, a placid, endearing person.

The captain of the ‘Allinn’ had Chollin clean herself and decorate and clothe herself as if she was a woman. He used pictures to show her how to be the woman he thought she should be. He had her taught to be a woman by a whore in the port of Opar when he finally reached there. With her hair restyled, with makeup on her face, and in a pretty dress, Chollin was raised in Opar to be a woman.

Not knowing her age, the captain of the ‘Allinn’ allowed his house to nominate a husband for her. Only after a sumptuous wedding, with all the rituals of courtship having been followed, was Chollin left alone with her husband.

Imagine his horror to find that the wife he had been so pleased to accept was a man. Imagine Chollin’s feelings when the love she felt for her husband was refused. It is not certain that she ever understood why she was rejected or why she was branded and returned to her exile in the Tavasails.

Most Oparites still believe she was treated with great leniency. Perhaps feeling guilty, the captain of the ‘Allinn’ returned to the Tavasails two years later to find her if he could. The old wreck in

which she had once lived, beside which she had been deposited by the royal warship that had carried out the court's sentence, had been destroyed and washed away in a great winter storm. Of Chollin, there was never another trace. (From the travelogue, "The Unknown South", by Paruton Newans Goroy, a memoir of sea travels in and about the islands and continent of Landsouth.)

"I've carried his picture in my locket, ever since, well, you know," Geray said, flushing as I used my makeup brush on my lips to make them pinker and shinier. She watched with great interest.

Her interest in me, Princess Rina, bordered on awe. She watched me do my makeup as if she had never seen a woman do her own makeup before. I could imagine her with her girl friends afterwards, saying "the Princess did it this way" and so on as if everything I did was what a woman should do. I felt a slight sickness all the time she watched me and chattered on about her love for Buron, who was really me. How could I have changed so much that she didn't see it in me? That was an awful thought. Had I changed *that* much? Perhaps I would never be able to get back. Was that why Atara had brought me to Ashun: to learn that there was no going back?

She was delighted to be my 'maid,' complimenting me on everything I wore, from my lace panties and bra, not realizing how fake I was. At least she gave me privacy to change my panties, but I had stood before her bare-breasted and shaking and she had not known it was me, Buron.

I had to change for the evening revel; she scurried over to help me with my bra. She loved my hair and confided that she had taken up braids in imitation of mine and *just wait* till I saw the other girls later that night. I would think I was looking in a mirror, she laughed, as every woman in Niccobi and the outliers was imitating the way I dressed.

"You've had the locket since Buron kissed you?" I asked, my throat dry, being deliberately dense about the jewellery she said that she wore all the time. 'Lord Buron' gave it to her after loving her, she said with a smile.

"No," Geray said, blushing even more.

Oh Saints no, I thought, trying to calm myself so that I didn't pop out of the delicate pink breast support I was wearing. I took advantage of you, I cried silently. You wept at everything I did at first. I hurt you and degraded you. I know now, I'm beginning to understand, after what I've been through. I shuddered and my new teardrop earrings began to shake on my neck, too. Just a thin braid was forward of my ear, the rest of my hair swept back in a thick twist over my shoulders. Pinning it with shaking feminized fingers, I barely heard what she whispered.

"He loved me," Geray whispered, her eyes bright. "Fathermine said that when he came back, his father would let him marry me if I was still of a mind to it. I-I cried so when he took me be-because I never thought it could be so, so ... I've never been so happy, but I shouldn't have cried because that brought Kerth, the ostler, and then fathermine."

I recalled the incident only too well and I longed to take her in my arms and ask her to forgive me. I was *such* a young man then. But I was seated before her in the lingerie of a great lady, with my silk slip above my knees. I fastened my stockings to my garter belt after she admired my smooth legs and pretty, frilly panties.

"The old lord interviewed me and he was the only one who seemed to understand," said Geray huskily, wiping tears from her face. "But he did let Buron go away. Then he left and we soon heard that he was dead. Fathermine said if, if Lord Buron came back, the old Lord had said that I had his blessing, but then we heard about the final attack on the citadel."

Geray began to weep. I wanted to take her in my arms, even though my breasts, as ample as hers, were sore. Panic hit me. If she was to find out now, she would have to blurt it out to the crowd we heard arriving to welcome me as a bride.

"I'm all right," Geray said as I gave her one of the flimsy handkerchiefs Atara made me carry. I touched her hand in silent compassion; she smiled through her tears at me and gently touched me back. I wanted it to be much more than that but she turned and picked up my white gown and began to help me to put it on, smoothing the tight-fitting bodice about my breasts and thin waist with gentle, practiced ease as light airy skirts and petticoats fell about my stockings and high heels.

I shivered; girlish feelings swept over me. But I also felt manly as well. I wanted to take Geray and press her to me. But what would she have felt but my soft, rounded, womanly breasts? How could I kiss her with lipstick on my lips while she had none?

"Really, I am over it," she went on after I murmured something in way of condolence. "Kerth has been so kind and un-



derstanding as well. It's just that when the prisoner lists came out, his name was on it."

"Prisoner lists?" I interrupted her. "Buron was taken prisoner? Who told you this?"

I frightened her. "Fathermine," she said. "I-I wanted to ask you, since you are our Princess, if you knew about him."

I took her hand in mine to comfort her. I didn't know what to tell her. I saw the hope and I didn't want to crush it. "I'll try to find out," I said weakly; she burst out in a great smile and hugged me, our breasts pushing together at last. She was totally unaffected by that but I experienced a flare-up in emotions unlike anything I had felt in months. My groin was on fire in its well-disguised trap.

Geray almost danced me into the revel, smiling in delight as her father intoned the welcoming words. I was ushered, hugely unsettled, to the bridal chair where the estatemmen I had known since I was a little boy now vied for the honor of paying me compliments upon my 'delicate' condition.

Some told me how much I looked like an Osterick which prickly Gerderas immediately reminded them was the Ospero look. Ostericks were just a distant relative of the Royal House, which they hoped I would renew. Without my braids and curls, without such a low-cut dress to reveal my cleavage, which is where so many of the men seemed to be concentrating as they spoke to me, I wondered if someone there would realize who had come home to Ashun.

Geray, changed into a pink dress with flowers in her hair, was my constant companion; proud to introduce me to people she thought I could never have met. She was amazed at my memory as I recalled all of a giggling group of girls' names accurately. She praised me as I matched the right boy friends to the right girls. And she was right about one thing. The girls were all wearing their hair like me and studying every inch of me as I danced with all the estatemmen, their boy friends. I didn't doubt that low-cut dresses would be in vogue, along with high heels and silvery stockings, never mind rosy scents and muted red lipstick.

Geray ran and scented my bath; she would have bathed me entirely but I refused that with a laugh. I was tense and strained and I wished I could let her really 'attend' me as she once had. I never let my maids bathe me, I said with a forced smile. I was still a young woman, wasn't I? Geray agreed laughingly that I was. In my nightdress and thin, silk robe, I let her comb out my blonde hair, which she adored.

"Every man in town and on the estate," she said impishly, "will be dreaming of making love to you tonight. What does a princess dream of?"

I should have said, you, my darling Geray, but she only gave me another of her beautiful smiles and then she was gone. I was left with the most unsettling dreams of her and me, of her distraught face when she learned how I had so deceived her as she tried to make love to her princess. That last one woke me up completely with a start, so vivid was it that, for a moment, I thought it true.

"She has a crush on you," said Atara next morning as we breakfasted on the loma-bordered terrace of the Great Hall; Geray played on the swings with some of the estate's children under the watchful eyes of our Guards.

I scowled at her and she laughed. "You always look so pretty when you try to act as if you are angry," she said.

I set the estate's reckoning book to one side. "You are being absurd," I said, wondering why I felt so girlish this morning in my petticoats for travelling. "She really doesn't see me at all."

"She sees what everyone sees," said Atara lazily. "She sees a beautiful young woman of her own age. Have you noticed her hair this morning? And where did those earrings come from? I'll bet the daughters of the estatemen will be braiding their hair this evening and curling it under at shoulder length as you have it now. You are a very influential young woman, my Princess."

I felt my temperature begin to rise. "As I said," I murmured, watching her laugh and smile with the other girls, so gorgeous, so naturally female. All the Guards were giving her quick looks no matter what their duties were supposed to be.

"She told me there was a prisoner list," I said quietly. "With my name on it. She thinks Buron Osterick is still alive."

"Where did she see this list?" she asked sharply.

"Gerderas told her I was still alive," I said. "She hopes to marry me when, if, I return from captivity."

"You didn't tell her?" she asked fearfully and it did me good for once to see her anxious. I milked the moment and her eyes narrowed as she hissed at me, "You fool."

"No," I told her. "I wanted to but if she had seen me like this and realized who I was, how long would her love have lasted?"

"Five minutes?" asked Atara, glancing at Geray who looked back over her shoulder and smiled gaily at her father coming up the walk from the sheds where we kept farm equipment.

"If she learned it from him," Atara said slowly, "he must be part of the Resistance."

I didn't have to be told what that was. "If you cause any harm to him," I said thickly, "or to Geray..."

"You'll do what?" she asked, sipping daintily on her tea.

"I'll strangle your child myself," I said. I meant it. I stood up with as much female grace as I could muster and went over to greet the old steward, returning his reckoning books to him.

"I suppose she told you her dream," he said gruffly as Geray jumped from the swings and brought the girls over to me. "She thinks Lord Buron will be back some day and make a Lady of her."

"You don't think so?" I asked, wondering if he had at last seen through me. I felt the strangest sensations running through me. I wanted him to know me and then, for his safety, I didn't.

"I think he is dead," said the old man. "We heard that first, then Reas had that damned list and I looked. I should never have told her."

Geray and the girls came flooding up to me, hugging me and saying goodbye. Geray kissed me affectionately on the cheek and held on to my hand, skipping along the pathway in high heels that I had never seen her wear about the manor house before.

“I wish you could stay, Princess,” she said. “I would love you to be here and I could be one of your friends.”

“Oh, Geray,” I said, breathing in the apple blossom scent of her dark hair that I remembered so well. “We will always be friends, you and I.”

Atara was livid as I passionately hugged the young woman and she just as passionately hugged me back, our breasts again in contact through our dresses, which bothered Geray not at all.

Geray wanted to show me more of the estate. She tugged on my arm and we walked together to the fish pools where the huge pike awaited their daily feed. We danced along the bank and I could see our reflections in the water. We were two young women together, arm-in-arm, one dark, one blonde, arms about each other’s narrow waists, our dresses swirling together. No one would be able to tell which was the male one, of that I am sure.

I sat in Jerna’s garden, watching the high clouds move in. The mute went into the suite. I thought she had gone to get me a blanket as she did in the late evening, pretending that the pillow I wore, my ‘delicate condition,’ made me unable to walk for myself. When she silently returned, I saw her but my mind was running over desperate schemes of escape. She touched my shoulder and, through tearing eyes as I thought of Geray, I looked up at her.

I wasn’t prepared for the blue cloth-wrap she had returned with or for the hard object that was within it. It felt heavy across my silk-covered knees. I folded it back, puzzled. The Therentian execution knife that lay there was flat, grey and brutal in its primitive design. The small barbs on either side were intended to rip the flesh so that if death was not instantaneous on the thrust, it would be sure to follow on the removal of the blade.

I stared in shock at the awful, ugly weapon across my pretty, light-blue silk dress. The mute touched my arm gently once more, nodding her head affirmatively as to say it was my only choice. Then, with great dignity, she turned and walked back into the suite, leaving me alone with my fate. My mouth went dry. Yes, I could do it now, I thought wretchedly. Poor Geray! Buron would never come back for her. I stood and walked towards the window until I could see myself on the long darkened windowpane.

How best to do it? The blonde girl in the window raised the knife to her throat, where a choker of pearls ran about my neck. She swallowed and looked ready to cry in the window-mirror. I imagined the blood from my neck spurting all over the place, but could I make sure before I weakened or fainted? Maybe it was better to just fall on the knife. If I wedged it in a trellis, I could close my eyes and just run into it and it would open up my stomach. If I wasn’t dead then, I could do it again or take it and go for my throat.

It was hard to wedge it tightly. I had to rip its blue covering cloth to bind it tightly to the frame but my trembling fingers finally did the job. I stepped back and kicked off my high heels, my feet feeling strange to not be in feminine shoes. I went back as far as I could, my cowardly mind screaming at me but I refused to listen. I looked at the knife. That was a mistake. It was *so* ugly.

I imagined the pain of it entering me and gave in for a moment to the fear of death and what would happen to me. I fought with my doubt and finally gained control. I looked at the red clingers climbing the trellis and began to run towards them. A stray thought passed through me that the clinger flowers were the color of my blood and I threw back my head and ran as hard as I could.

I had my eyes closed when something crashed into me. I landed in a tub of blue, mossy ferns and someone's arms were about me, pulling me backwards on top of them.

"No, Reenya, no!" said a hoarse, masculine voice from behind my head. I opened my eyes and turned quickly, ignoring the pain from my shoulder and back from where I had landed on the now demolished tub of redmary flowers.

Reenya? Only in southern Vesia would they say my name like that. My name? It wasn't my name and I did not have any idea who the man was who was holding me down, calling me that, either.

"You, you," I gasped, meaning to say that he was an idiot for stopping me from doing what I had to do.

He actually smiled at me; I'm sure I looked shocked to him. Well, I *was* at being still alive and uninjured, well, mostly uninjured.

"Yes, it's me," he said. He began to shake his head, his hair long and dark. "You weren't *really* going to kill yourself, were you? You would have run by that thing, wouldn't you?"

I swore at him. One of the curses I'd learned long ago from Sergeant Corso, listening to him trying to straighten up our recruits. I ended with, "What did it look like, you idiot!"

I pushed him from me, my dress torn and ruined, a huge slash through my slip as well, exposing my stockings and garters. He held me down long enough to get to his feet first. A determined look on his face, he went to the trellis as I limped after him, wondering how I had hurt my hip so much. He undid the wrapping about the Therentian knife and took it from the trellis.

"You were trying to kill yourself," he said, his long face very pale. His mouth dropped open a little as he shook his head. "Are things so bad, Reenya, that this was your only way out?"

I looked hard at him, feeling strangely relieved that he had stopped me. He must also have known Rina before. His pronunciation was almost like an endearment that he must have shared with her. It might make things easy.

"If you love me," I said huskily. "You will do this for me and Niccobi," I said, stepping closer to him. I reached out to his hand. "Put it into me and let all this suffering end."

I closed my eyes and edged towards him. "Make it quick," I whispered. "Do it quickly before my jailers return." I quivered and hoped he would be smarter and braver than me.

A moment passed. Then I felt him take me about the shoulders and I felt warm lips pressing on mine. The idiot was kissing me!

I broke it off and pushed him away, hard. "What do you think you are doing?" I snapped at him. "Kill me! Quickly, while there's still time!"

Even more color seemed to drain from his face. "Reenya," he said, horrified. "I-I could never kill my betrothed."

"What!" I have never been so astounded in my life before.

He repeated what he had said again as I stared at him, dumbfounded. I was supposed to be a married woman. How could I be betrothed to anyone, especially an idiot, as he appeared to be? He held the knife behind him, his other arm extended towards me to keep me from getting to it.

I looked at him closely. There was something familiar about him, as if I had seen him somewhere before. He must be a highborn noble to even think he was betrothed to the Princess Rina. He was tall and had long, brown hair, a patrician nose, and wide, well-spaced brown eyes. He wore a dark grey sweater and pants. I saw suction cups and bands about his knees, ankles and elbows. Suction cups?

"You climbed the wall?" I gasped and he nodded and smiled proudly.

"Reas said I would kill myself but there is a spot in the buttress, you know, where you can rest," he said. "It took me all last night. The hardest part was getting over the last twenty feet and into Queen Jerna's Garden. They've coated the walls with something and if I hadn't been lucky and found a seam that was thinly coated, that I chipped out, I'd have had to go back in full daylight and they would have gotten me for sure."

"Just let go of that knife," snapped a cool, familiar voice from behind.

We both jerked at that voice. Lady Atara came through the doorway from my apartments, the goad in her hand. I saw my 'betrothed' recognize it for what it was and back away.

"This will be a pretty story," she said. "Which state shall we blame for sending a prince-assassin to execute the consort-with-child of the Lord Sovereign of Therentia? It will make the conquest of Matona, the breakup of Opar's League and subjection of Southern Vesia all foregone conclusions."

"I'm no assassin!" blurted out the young man, "though I am a prince. I prevented Reenya from killing herself. I did! She had this tied to that trellis and was going to run into it!"

Atara looked at me then. "This is true?" she asked. Her hand caressed her rounded stomach. "You would ruin me just when all our plans are reaching their fruition?"

My throat was dry. "Please," I said to the prince, if that is what he was. I tried to be womanly. "Please, if you love me. Kill me now. Don't let me be part of their wicked schemes any more."

"But your child!" he protested.

I was close to being hysterical. I tore up my dress and pulled down the pillow I wore. "I'm not the one who is carrying Gendrick's child," I said, holding it out to him. "Kill me!"

He was still staring at me, staring at my pretty panties, my garter belt, stockings and bare breasts exposed by ripping my maternity dress. He didn't have a chance to avoid the goad when Atara lashed him with it. Like Reneth, he was a writhing, weeping, uncomprehending figure of pain as Atara stood over him. She took the knife, frowning while giving a quick glance back at my rooms.

"The only thing you have accomplished tonight is to kill him, not you," she said at last. "You and the mute will help. We can throw him back over the wall. His friends will think he never made it."

"He said he was a prince," I said.

She nodded. "Barthes of Matona," she said. "He is the third in line. He fancies himself as a daredevil. Typical younger son."

"He said he was my betrothed," I finished.

"Ah," she said. She looked at my breasts, then at my exposed panties and legs. I stared at her, at how she showed that she was a real woman. I felt nothing as I stood there in my female underwear. I had no feminine feelings for him, that was for sure. I didn't care if he lived or died. She looked at him, groaning at her feet. "You want to keep him alive, don't you?" she said, smiling at me. "He probably is your one true love, Princess Rina."

XI. GENDRICK AND CHASMUN

COYCH. From the reign of Coych as Lord Sovereign of Opar descend its liberal morality laws. Coych ascended the throne early and was an unusually just and generous ruler. He maintained not only the peace and contentment of his own state, but also peaceful relations with his generally weaker, if more warlike, neighbors.

It was quite by chance that his Chief Bureaucrat, finding no one guarding the royal apartments, while he had urgent business with the King, broke a previously inviolate rule and burst in to find his King. In the King's bedchamber, he met a strange young woman whom he had never seen before. She was richly dressed and clearly embarrassed at being discovered.

Her embarrassment alerted the Chief Bureaucrat to the fact that something unusual was going on. One can imagine his consternation upon discovering through his persistence that the long-haired, voluptuous girl was none other than his own lawful King, Coych of Opar.

Tried and sentenced to death by his own Lords-in-Council, Coych stoically accepted his fate, even the scorn heaped upon him by inferiors. His good works, however, had not been forgotten by the people of Opar, a mob of whom overran the Council chambers, restoring the monarch to his rightful place.

Within a year, nevertheless, Coych, his public duties now a torment to him, particularly with the accusations flung at him by those defeated in lawsuits, abdicated in favor of his younger brother, Coyant, and retired to an enclave of an ascetic Saints' house. He was probably correct to do this for

public conjecture of how he might appear as a woman, and when and if he could, had become a scandal.

Coyant, however, proved to be the most tyrannical ruler in all Opar's long history, even more so than the odious Pherenlie. Ultimately, he was deposed by the same Lords-in-Council who had deposed and continued to debase Lord Coych. In a rare display of generosity, however, they each pledged loyalty to 'Good King Coych.' They sent a delegation to the enclave, including soldiers, in case the Saint refused.

Coych was captured and returned to Opar as King. He married an understanding woman and, if he became noticeably more feminine after his marriage, Oparites ignored the phenomenon. For him, his wife arranged apartments in the female quarter of the palace, which were never violated by men, certainly not Chief Bureaucrats. Her 'sister' lived there with her and if the sister bore a passing resemblance to King Coych, no one dared to remark on it without running the risk of meeting the wrath of Coych's queen.

His son, Coymmer, eventually promulgated the tolerant morality laws of Opar, since they had become customary, decreeing no punishment other than the brand and exile for those who 'flaunt' themselves in public as members of the opposite sex. (From the suppressed history text, "After the Fall of Empires", by Sennay Turanie, published in Opar, and still found in most libraries in Vesia, despite its banning by successive Oparite Kings).

"How can she be your betrothed, your grace, when she is married to King Gendrick?" asked Atara as we sat in my bedroom, the Stertian mute attending to the burn along Prince Barthes' arm.

"She can tell you," he said unsteadily. His eyes barely left my face and figure. The new, low-cut Therentian dress I wore, showing off my legs, pretty stockings, and my open-toed high heels, drew his attention whoever spoke to him. Atara had already let him know that he was only alive because I had pleaded with many tears for his life. I had promised not to kill myself if Lady Atara and the Stertian mute did not throw him back over the wall as he deserved.

"You tell me," said Atara firmly.

"This is going to be good," I murmured, giving him a look that let him know that he hadn't been forgiven for not killing me when I begged him to. If he said how much I had changed, that he wouldn't recognize me now, or that I was 'much improved,' as if I was a racehorse, I would definitely kick him hard where it would hurt.

"The Osperos have always had the Old Sea Palace for Heat," he said. "We called Os-sarie, 'Lord Ospero,' when he and the family were in residence. My elder brother, Yares, made a crude joke about thirds and turds that made Princess Rina run from the ballroom during one of the little balls they had organized for the girls. The King, my father, sent me to apologize for the family.

"You were crying in the arbor, Reenya, and then you apologized to me and my family for being so sensitive and we talked. I found out then how much Teva and Heday put on

you, as my brothers did on me. It was a beautiful night on the sea, the loma was in blossom, we kissed and I made you promise to marry me.

"You never took me seriously and laughed at me whenever I called you my betrothed. You asked me to stop, before the Sack, at the Solstice Revel, because Heday thought it was so funny. She was teasing you all the time about your figure and saying you could never wear white if you kept on eating the way you did. She was pretty awful to you.

"Then you said we could be secretly betrothed if I liked. And I realized you were serious. I said 'No' to that and you got mad and cried and stomped off. Every time I've seen you since the Sack, I've realized what a fool I was. You've become such a different girl. Everyone says how much you've improved. I would hardly recognize you; you've become so beautiful. And so when Reas said they had found an unlikely way to get a message to you, I volunteered to come."

"They?" I asked, mystified. I re-crossed my legs and his eyes followed my movements hungrily. If the mute hadn't been taking her time bandaging him, he'd have joined me on the sofa, I was certain.

"The Resistance," said Atara coolly. "It is led by former Third Bureaucrat Reas of Niccobi, trying to keep alive the hope of driving out the Therens. They hope to kill Gendrick and place either you or your child on the throne of the restored independent sovereignty of Niccobi. The fools have a hard enough time just keeping the date and time of their meetings secret from Chasmun's men. Gerderas, by the way, is their contact at Ashun. They want you to record a message of support for them."

One look at Barthes' stricken face confirmed everything she said. "You climbed a four hundred foot wall with sucker cups for that?" I asked, disbelieving that anyone could be so stupid.

His face clouded over as the Stertian mute looked at me impassively, completing the bandaging of his arm. "Why did you want me to kill you?" Barthes asked, looking at Atara, the knife and goad resting in her lap. "You could climb that garden wall and throw yourself off, couldn't you, since you aren't pregnant?"

"She's tried that," said Atara dryly, signalling to the mute to leave and fetch tea. She grimaced suddenly and put her hand on her stomach. She looked at my anxious face and added, "He kicked me," with a smile. "Be a good girl and order real cream for my tea, my Princess. I hate that thin stuff we serve you to keep your girlish figure."

My ears were burning as I flounced out of the bedroom and went to the antechamber and the console. The mute was standing there in the grip of a Storm Guard officer. She tried to gargle something to me but a second Guard came in through the open doorway with a cutter-beam in his hand.

"Undermarshal Bregg, majesty," said the officer, releasing the Stertian and motioning to me to follow the other guard out of the door. "I have orders to take you away from the concubine at this time."

"Whose orders?" I gasped in panic as he came and took my arm. I was propelled at speed down an empty hallway. My heels clicked an eerie staccato as we turned along hallways I hadn't known existed. Storm Guards I didn't know guarded each door and af-

firmed Bregg with nods as I was sped out onto a rampart where a multi-seat thopter waited.

I was pushed in, my skirts a mess about me. I was barely seated, and Bregg not at all, when the thopter launched itself into the air. "Where are y-you taking me?" I stammered in panic. Bregg swayed as he first buckled me in, then took one of the empty seats beside me. Grey stone whirled by the windows in dizzying, frightening nearness until suddenly we were in sky and then clouds.

"To your husband," said Bregg, eyeing me with frank admiration. I looked down and my dress was hiked up, revealing everything to his appreciative gaze. He reached over and released my seat buckle. I was able to smooth my dress under me and rearrange it so that he didn't get such an eyeful of leg and stocking. "We'll be in Matona in four hours."

Gendrick awaited me on the thopter-landing pad on top of a high building; many more buildings surrounded us, higher still. I felt like clinging to Bregg as he helped me out of the machine, winds whipping at my skirts and hair. I was terrified that at any moment I was going to be blown right off the top of the. I was then confronted by Gendrick, who wanted to kiss me, long and tenderly, in front of his officers as I trembled with numerous fears assailing me.

He realized my fear and was very considerate in getting me quickly to the elevator and down into the building. I was able to compose myself. His arm about my waist, he ushered me into a wide luxurious apartment, ordering the one aide he allowed with us to close the curtains on the windows before he left.

Then, he put his arms about me and hugged me to him. "I've missed you," he whispered into my ear and I was shocked by the banality of his remark. He was treating me as if I really was his wife! He was treating me as if I was his woman as he kissed me again, this time more fiercely, hungrily pressing my body, my breasts, into him. The aide silently withdrew and Gendrick's kissing became more intense. I was *so* terrified. He was treating me as if he had every right to kiss me, another man. His hands caressed my dress, pulling me close to him.

"Ah," he sighed, undoing my braid and running his face through my soft, billowing hair as I quivered in his arms. "This is what I missed. The scent and softness of you. It captivates me. I hope you feel it too. You do, don't you? You are my wife in all ways."

"My Lord Sovereign," I began, a catch in my breath, which I knew was from fear of him.

"You never have to be so formal with me," he said, guiding me through another set of doors. There we were in his bedroom. Panic threatened to overcome me. "You'll have to excuse me, darling, for wanting you before I offer you refreshment as I intended but I cannot wait a moment longer."

He undid my dress as my temperature rose. His hands were all over me, caressing my breasts as he released me from my slip and bra. I knew exactly what he was going to do to

me, how I was going to be debased. I knew, worst of all, that I was going to submit to him. I was going to be a woman for him. I had to or lady Atara's plot would never succeed.

He pushed me onto the soft bed and made love to me in a way that I don't recall he ever did before. He made love to me as if I was a real woman, kissing my face gently, then my neck and my breasts, his hands signalling how I was to arch to press myself rigidly against him to increase his pleasure in taking me. In no time at all, a man had taken me, filled me with his masculine pleasure and was telling me what a wonderful woman I was.

He would not let me up to wash and repair my ravaged face until I experienced the same pleasure he had. He promised me that our pleasure would be equal as King and Queen and so I had to kiss him ardently, which he loved. He got his pleasure again as his hands gently made sure that I was aroused to a quivering finale and release as he discharged inside me again. His mouth fought mine as I gasped for air, his tongue in my mouth, our bodies tightly entwined as he emptied himself. He insisted that I do the same; that was the proof, I knew, in his eyes, that I loved him, loved him as his woman.

We bathed together, my false front long disappeared in the bed, as he fondled me, and my breasts betrayed me each time. I hated it. I hated *him* but I didn't know what else to do. At least kissing him cut off the stream of compliments to my femininity. He soaped me everywhere and bathed me, as my maids were never allowed to do. With my hair plastered back behind my ears, my body wet, I rose from the bath. He stopped me and we looked at our bodies side-by-side in the dark mirrors of his bathroom.

We were illustrations for a book on the differences between men and women. My face was womanly even without makeup; my eyebrows were narrow, and my eyelashes thick and curled. Where his features were strong and angular, mine were rounded and smooth. My figure was dominated by my firm shapely breasts, my nipped-in waist and my wide feminine hips. My legs were long, rounded and smooth. Only the male member spoiled the picture of female perfection.

"We could do something about that," he whispered, kissing my neck as he towelled me, as a maid might her mistress. "But I don't know. It still gives you pleasure, my sweetness, doesn't it?" He caressed my rounded posterior and hugged my thin, smooth body to his. My breasts were soft and large, it seemed to me, as he drew me into him.

I nodded, trying to control the shame and horror I felt. He eased me 'round and began to kiss me; with shock and disgust, I felt his erection against me again. He laughed. "It happens sometimes," he said, his hands cupping my breasts. "With you, my lovely princess, it happens all the time. Are you not proud of your ability to excite me, my darling?"

He spun me around and bent me over a chair. I got to watch the contortions on both our faces as he took me again, striving and striving to reach his climax, which he did as my breasts jiggled in front of him. The moaning I heard came from me, as if I enjoyed him taking me like that.

When I straightened up, I guided one of his hands to my manhood and another to my aroused breasts. He exploded in me, grunting and shouting, more loudly than me, so proud of coming inside me, another man. He wouldn't stop fondling until I came again as well.

We washed again, but nothing could truly clean me. I remembered the time the Stertians had nearly drowned poor old Nimerun and me. Nothing could get the shame and dishonour from me as he insisted on tying the fresh and clean artificial vagina to me, then he helped me dress in a white, frilly, summer dress, Therentian style. He loved attaching my garters, kissing my legs as he did so. I had to beg him to stop before I threw him on the bed, which he said he would seriously enjoy.

The console announced that the Lord Marshal and Staff were in the outer apartment. "I've kept them waiting two hours," said Gendrick, taking me in his arms. I quivered and my partly wet hair quivered about me. "No," he smiled at me. "It's you, my darling wife, who have kept me from my military, but not, my sweetness, from my royal duties."

Of course he put me on display in front of his officers, with my hair still partly damp. Some of them smiled at me. In several, I could sense something. I realized that it was that they wanted me too, and Gendrick was parading me past them to show them what he had that they could never have.

Then there was Lord Chasmun. He was affronted by me being at the meeting. He could see that the others were distracted when I sat down in my rusty dress and crossed my legs, my stockings so faint as to be transparent, revealing to all what my shapely legs were like. Unlike the panting officers, Chasmun was angry.

"We are too exposed here, majesty," he said formally. "And with Princess Rina here, the terrorists would have quite a coup if they brought down this building."

His words had hardly died away before the whole room seemed to sway as if some giant had picked up the building, shaken it and set it back down again.

"What, by the gods, was that?" began Gendrick. The doors opened and more aides poured in, armed and looking for trouble.



It was Chasmun who was the decisive one. "The Lord Sovereign to Corps headquarters!" he said to one Undermarshal. "We need to separate the targets before another attack. Bregg! Get the Queen-to-be out of here, back to Niccobi."

Bregg appeared at my elbow as Gendrick was swept away from me, waving as his aides urged him out of the doorway and into a waiting elevator.

Lord Chasmun then strode over to me, and said to Bregg, "I'll take the Queen-to-be in my transport, Bregg. Meet us at field headquarters with a different thopter. This might be random or it could be a planned attack on either target. Let's not be predictable."

Bregg gave the nod and ran for a stairwell. Chasmun took my arm as I watched fearfully the activity all about me. Gendrick's staff hustled away all his papers and personal trophies. Chasmun took me to a central passageway where escalators were being controlled by Storm Guards and we were hurtled to the basement of the building at speeds I never knew that the moving staircases could go. I felt so conspicuous. I was the only one in a white dress and with billowing, golden hair, high heels and stockings that made my legs look bare.

"Gendrick is clear," he murmured. "And Bregg. No missiles in the air." An armoured staff car squealed to a halt in front of us. Chasmun opened the door and pushed me in, coming in after me and partly sitting on my dress as the car took off.

"Mmm," he murmured. "You smell so sweetly this evening. New perfume?"

"Bathing salts," I said, noting that the car was now driving at a leisurely pace and into the traffic of what seemed an ordinary Matonan day. A sense of unease rippled through me. Chasmun had moved up close to me, still on my dress. "Shouldn't we be hurrying?"

He grinned at me; even though he was tall and dark, like Gendrick, I felt no fear as he looked me over. Instead, my unease changed to a strange, comforting feeling. It was most odd.

"There won't be another explosion here," Lord Chasmun said, speaking in clipped tones as if he was reciting notes to me. "Maybe one over at Corps headquarters. Stray shots from our side, so to speak. Very valuable as bargaining chips, you know. We will get you back to Niccobi, still the safest place for you and, yes, your baby. Heard you had a visitor. Very enterprising lad. That was an impossible climb, Bregg assured me."

We went into the underground parking of another building and I realized we were in a hotel. "Where are we going?" I asked nervously as we got out; the car took off like a rocket. Chasmun took my hand and walked me into an ordinary elevator and up one floor. I walked as daintily as I could in my new high heels. I saw him look me up and down appreciatively as we stopped outside a woman's shop.

"You really don't need this," he said, "but the few women on my staff said it would be a necessity for any beautiful woman and that, of course, is what you are. But it is a new experience for *me*, my princess."

I flushed and walked into a shop devoted to women. I could hardly tell him that it was all new to me as well. I saw him reflected in the mirrors looking at my figure as I minced away from him on my long, stockinged, legs. I was wobbling on the inside. The beauty shop expected me and so my hair braid and makeup were resurrected within the hour,

while Chasmun, Lord Marshal of Therentia, sat patiently and read women's fashion magazines. I was primed for an evening out.

"You read stuff like this?" asked the Lord Marshal as he tossed the magazine down and took my hand.

"I have to," I said, flushing anxiously.

He took me to the elevators and we joined others going up in the hotel. I got several looks and smiles from men, more like invitations than anything else. The suite Chasmun led me to had a television blaring in one corner and waiters in another, laying out a mouth-watering meal.

"These are all our men," said Chasmun as the waiters withdrew. "You'll be safe here. Matona doesn't have your image plastered everywhere, either, as in Therenlie and Niccobi."

"Safe?" I asked bitterly as the telecast began talking about the attacks on the Therentian headquarters in Matona and the predictable government outrage at whoever had perpetrated such an outrage. I wasn't mentioned in it all, not yet anyway.

Lord Chasmun held my chair for me and in every way treated me like a woman having dinner with her date.

"It's a pity you have to go back," he said as he escorted me from the dinner table to a comfortable sofa in the viewing area in the next room. He came and sat next to me, and I felt my discomfiture rising. I could see a glint in his eye. He took my hand in his, gently examining the shape and femininity of my nails.

"Lord Chasmun," I said shakily.

"Satisfy my curiosity," he said and put his arm about my shoulder. He kissed me and I responded almost instantly. No, I didn't slap his face. No, I didn't pull away. I didn't cry or quiver with repressed fear. No, I responded as if I was a woman, a *real* woman. I accepted his kiss, welcomed it, *loved* it. I let him hug me to him and I welcomed the touch and taste of him as his tongue ran over my lips and entered my mouth.

Earlier I had done this with Gendrick but this was different. I had known somehow that this was going to happen since he had taken my arm when we left the car. I had seen the admiring way he looked at me. I had felt it through my body, the womanly feelings; they roared through my body now as he kissed me and, yes, I kissed him.

"Well," he said as I trembled against him. He kissed the top of my head. "Now I know why Gendrick is obsessed with you. Do you kiss him like that?"

That hurt me. I shook my head and sat up and looked at him. "You're Gendrick's cousin," I said slowly.

"But I'm not Gendrick," he said. "I have a message for Atara. Bregg is Gendrick's man and she'll be pleased to know that Prince Barthes is a thopter pilot. All his family are."

"Oh," I gasped. "Is that how you are getting her out?"

He looked at me steadily. "Sort of," he said. He patted my hand. "Now that you have satisfied my curiosity, I must get you back to safety before Gendrick finds out about the stray shots today."

"I-I have a request," I said, forcing myself to be daring. "More than one."

He stood up and pulled me to my feet amid a feminine rustle of the petticoats attached to my dress. I held onto his hands. "You cannot threaten me," he said, his strong face fixed in an expression of strength and purpose.

"I want to know what has happened to my brothers, where they are and what is being done to them. I want them to be raised as boys, not girls, as you promised," I said nervously.

"I promised to save their lives, that is all," he rumbled in his deep voice.

"I want to know about the Stertian women," I went on, trying to be brave and not look at his stern face. "Did you kill them all? And the prisoner list. Why am on it? I know I am. I'm not the only one you've been experimenting on, am I? I don't know them all. I only know Detter whom I saw as Helena, and Nimerun, whom I think Zadmer operated on. Oh, I think I saw Lerrens and Muttie who were older cadets. I know there were eight, at least. I want them to go free. They shouldn't have to have like this because of me."

He nodded slowly as I began to shake and I know a tear, drat it, rolled down my cheek. "I don't think all the Stertians were all killed," he said slowly. "One was saved for you, I know that. Atara, Reneth and Zadmer have a special division in Brossin's Tower in the citadel where Bregg supplies security. He'd tell me but it would get back to Gendrick that I was enquiring if I put a question like you asked of me to him. Let me do what I can for your brothers but you have to know that Lady Cadella, who has your brothers, was Gendrick's spy long before our attack. She still is."

That sent chills through me. I stood in front of him in my high heels and looked up into his serious face. I was going to say something stupid like I would be very grateful to him if he could find this information for me but I looked at his thoughtful expression and it died inside me. He drew me to him and my skirts swayed femininely against me and my breasts touched his uniform

"I have no one else to ask," I said huskily, feeling like a tramp, as he did as I expected and softly kissed me. He smiled then and nodded.

"Soon," he said. He smiled bleakly. "I look forward to the time when we acknowledge you as a mother and our Queen."

XII. BREGG'S REWARD

HECTAY. Once there was King in Landsouth, some say of Ferminal, others say of Gerrimane. This king was named Hectay, which is a woman's name; perhaps it wasn't always that, a woman's name. Some said his name was Keron. It might have been. It was a time of too many kings and too many kingdoms; so who can say for true save that this was an earnest king who tried to do what was right.

He would disguise himself as a poor man, a merchant, a soldier, or a shepherd to find out the effect of his decrees and to investigate complaints. His wife did not approve. She was a princess in her own right, proud and stern.

Some cunning courtiers told the king how badly many women were treated in his kingdom. Marriage was often slavery for young girls. His wife protested that it wasn't true and if it was, he could and should do nothing. The king sought to find the truth for himself as his courtiers had expected.

Once he had donned female garments, the disguised king was taken by wives of the rebellious courtiers to the most private of women's rites, the coming of age ceremonies of young girls, rites no man should attend. There, he was unmasked by others of the plotters. He was caught and brought before the women for judgement while his wife's brother took his throne.

The women of his kingdom knew him, however, and knew how naïve, if well intentioned, he was. They were not fools and understood the power of his enemies. They disguised him more perfectly than before and named him Hectay. None surrendered him, though his wife went on a bloody search for him.

The Revolt of the Women brought him back to the throne and placed his wife's head on a pike above the city gate beside that of her brother. Hectay appointed only women to his new council, fighting women, who had learned to fight and kill from him. They refused to allow him to become a man again.

Paintings by Jeres-Tenson show a striking, red-haired woman, in a queen's tiara, very feminine and surrounded by taller, armoured women in various poses. All are called 'Hectay and the Council of Women.' She wears a slitted skirt, silver stockings and red high-heeled shoes to match her dress and hair. Supposedly these are authentic. Other less romantic historians, like Athepas of Opar aver that it is only a legend to explain why the cities of the Fermin River have women in their councils and why their leaders are called Queens, even though they are all men today. (From the out-of-print history text, 'Legends of a Dark Continent' by Lord Finas Dellon Notherick, a nobleman of Matona, found in the Royal and University Libraries there.)

Luckily, though I shouldn't use such a word, for it only applied to our very peculiar situation, things in Matona went from bad to worse. There were frequent attacks on Therentian merchants and visitors as the city and the League led by Opar haggled over terms to accommodate the wishes of the powerful Therentian Lord Sovereign on their doorstep. Lady Atara and I saw Gendrick in conferences constantly in the nightly vidcasts, often with Chasmun, playing at being the statesman but always with the Storm Guard about him.

"At the first break for new instructions by the League, he'll be back here," said Atara, standing and stroking my long braids, as sitting pained her. Waddling about my apartment with the mute attending her as a nurse pleased her very much; she still checked on me to see that I was being as feminine as I should be, even in private.

I was now 'confined,' or so the story was given out, me not wishing the public to see me in my changed condition. Somehow, Prince Barthes had been co-opted by Atara and was busy in Jerna's Garden, constructing something he kept under a huge, green tarpaulin. Fall was almost over and I had to wear a long coat when I went out to find him, working away on his contraption.

"Be careful of that tank," he said sharply as I took him a sandwich and hot drink and brought over a chair so that I could look at what he was doing.

"You're assembling a thopter?" I asked, astounded, and he grinned at me.

"Stolen right from Storm Guard supplies," he said proudly. "One of the newest, a two man, or should I say, two person job. No outside sheathing, of course, but this little motor will do its job, with the fuel from that tank which I'll only put in at the last moment. Don't want to wake the neighbors, do we?"

"But a thopter?" I gasped. "You would have to test that all the parts work. And the noise when you take off. It will draw missiles, if it works at all."

"Reas tested every part before he sent it to me," Barthes said confidently. "It will work, Reenya. It really will. It will carry a pilot and one passenger with child across Niccobi. Once we are low into the trees, they can't track us."

"It's idiotic!" I said. "They will shoot us down!"

"The mother of Gendrick's child?" he asked, munching on the sandwich I made him. "Even if they know that the Queen-to-be is going to be captured by the desperate Resistance Party of Niccobi, what can they do about it? They won't shoot." He picked up the tea and drank. "You made this?" he said, his eyes twinkling. "And you said you couldn't cook."

I looked at him and he started eating again. "It's good," he said.

"I'm not a complete waterbrain," I snapped at him and he winced. I had been allowed by Atara to research Rina's visit to Matona. 'Waterbrain' was how the three sisters were described in one political debate about Matona allying itself to Niccobi.

It felt good to be able to let fly at someone, even as a shrewish woman. I had to hold my tongue so much around the apartments. I had to say the opposite of what I meant to Gendrick, of course. So, poor Barthes was my only target. "I am not going in a contraption like that! Just because your royal hands assembled it doesn't mean it will fly and getting away from the walls in an open flier with men running along the battlements with cutter beams and shoulder missiles ... Ugh! I'm not *that* crazy and I don't have a death wish like you!"

Prince Barthes almost choked, he was laughing so hard at me. I had to go over to him and slap his back, then I rubbed it as he regained his breath. Somehow, he slipped his hands inside my coat and was hugging me to him. I was just trying to help him to get better.

"Now don't think," I began and he stood up and kissed me before I could stop him. He tasted of hammed meat and mustard and smelled of manly sweat as he held me tight; I felt a sort of desperation in him.

Oh well, I thought. Since we were going to die together in that awful, rickety contraption, I let him kiss me. I had been kissed by men now often enough not to be in revulsion at his attempts to arouse me. Actually, it wasn't so bad; he stroked my back and pulled me to him. He touched my breasts and I recoiled, pulling myself free.

“You let me do a lot more last time I was here,” he said, holding onto my arms as I looked up into his flushed countenance. “I know with that hag watching us, it isn’t easy. But we can go into the trees, like we did off the barge.”

“That was another time,” I said, refusing to discuss events I had not been there for.

“You are another woman,” he said slowly, not letting me go and staring at me intently. I held my breath, biting at my lip again, looking up at him, shivering in the cold night air. How could I explain? How could I tell him to protect our plot that I was a woman, sort of, but not *his* woman? What other lies could I tell?

“I want you even more,” he said quietly. “You’re so much stronger now. You’ve changed physically and mentally, haven’t you? You’re not the girl I knew before who was only interested in clothes.”

I took the high road. “I can act any part,” I said unsteadily. “If you want me to be a bubblehead again, I can do that. You should see me with my husband. That’s all he wants from me.”

“I don’t want the old you,” he said suddenly. “The only reason I went with you was because Yares told me what you did for him and how easy you were. It was demeaning to be serviced like that.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. I shuddered despite the coat I was wearing.

“I’m sorry,” he said stiffly. “I don’t mean to hurt you by dragging it up. You’re not that girl any more. But you must have had a very low opinion of me letting you do what you did for me, while you let me...feel you.”

“Stop!” I hissed, blushing furiously. It hadn’t been me. I was a man, not a woman. I hadn’t had sex, or what passed for it, with Barthes. I had only kissed him.

“I’m ashamed,” I said, looking up at him and thinking of what I had done with Gen-drick, so much worse. “I hate myself for what I have done in the past. I don’t intend to ever do it again with any man.”

Then the fool pulled me to him and began to kiss me again. He was so fervent in his kissing that I didn’t have to do more than hold onto him and he got much pleasure, I think, just from that.

“Oh, Reenya,” he breathed into my ear, pressing my earring against my neck. “It was all my fault. I insisted each time. You know that. I treated you horribly. Forgive me, my darling Reenya, and let’s start again.”

We kissed some more and that was where Atara and the mute found us, leaning against the infernal machine, his arms inside my coat again. I let him take what pleasure he could from my feminine form. The machine creaked and swayed each time we pressed against it. I would need my head examined if I ever allowed myself to be strapped to that death trap again, I told myself.

“Wake up!” snapped Atara and I swam to consciousness to find her, the mute, and prince Barthes in my bedroom; he looked very soldier-like in his Storm Guard uniform. “The Matona Conference broke up last night. I have had to make Zadmer induce me. I’m well along and dilated. Our child,” she grimaced awfully as she spoke to me, “will be born very soon.”

I got up, my flimsy nightdress falling about my figure. “What do I do?” I asked huskily, conscious of Barthes gawking at my female figure. Strangely, it didn’t bother me any more that he did that.

“Bathe quickly,” she snapped, “and get dressed, the dark dress, coat and boots, as we planned. Barthes...” she addressed the prince who was still staring at me, his eyes almost popping out of his head at what I was revealing. “Barthes, go and get the thopter ready.”

When he was reluctantly gone, she turned to me, refusing the bed and easing towards the bathroom with me. She opened the boxy appliance she was carrying. “Advanced com-set,” she said. “Military-grade. It’s a gift from the Lord Marshal for this occasion. You’ll note that every channel can be listened to. One is Bregg’s private channel. He’s expecting notification that Gendrick is in the air and on his way here at any moment. We have less than four hours to do this. Go on, girl. Don’t be shy in front of me. I’ve seen every part of you, disguised and not. Bathe and put on a new feminine device.”

I did so hastily, wondering if Barthes would break in on us and see me. Once I had tied myself up in my tight vagina disguise and gotten my panties on, I knew he wouldn’t be able to tell I wasn’t real.

Zadmer, the Chief Physician, arrived without a signal as I was putting on my bra. He ignored me as I dressed in female lingerie and immediately began to examine Atara. He looked worried.

“This is too soon,” he said. “I should take you to the Med Room. It may take surgery to birth this child, my Lady.”

“It will be done here,” said Atara grimly. “Give me more of your drugs. When our Lord Sovereign arrives, he will find me well and rested, our baby in its bassinet, and all we shall have to do then is set the date for the announcement of the premature birth. You know the plan he approved, Zadmer.”

The physician nodded doubtfully and looked at me, as I put on my stockings and garter belt. “Into the bed, then?” he asked nervously and Atara agreed. I helped her and she pressed an earjack into my hand.

My three beauticians hadn’t arrived so I had to do my own hair and makeup while Zadmer used the mute as a nurse and attended to Atara. I pressed the jack into my ear as I put on my earrings and instantly I was listening to flight control over Niccobi. They were clearing all incoming traffic to the old terminal outside the city and restricting thopter flights to the West side of the river.

“Estimated time of arrival of Thopter One is in two and one half hours, people,” cut in a new, excited voice. “Look alert, now. Look alert.”

I touched the tuner dial on the comset and I was listening to the guards on the parapets, the quartermaster offices, the patrol officer complaining about a soldier on his roster being too new to be able to do his job properly. Then I was back to Bregg's channel.

Barthes came and helped me with my hair, braiding it for me and putting in the dark blue ribbon to hold it in place. I realized what he was doing only after I started on my eyebrows, making the feminine arch more pronounced. I was letting a man help me be a woman. He stared at me hungrily as I started to do my makeup and his evident desire to have me distracted me from what was happening in the bed.

I was working on darkening my lids when Atara let out a loud scream and started cursing in the most extreme soldier's language, lashing out at Zadmer and the mute who were within reach of her fists.

I looked up wildly at Barthes who gazed back sheepishly at me. "Won't be too long," he said. I listened to air control adjusting its time of arrival downward for Thopter One as Zadmer told Atara how far she was distended. It seemed like a race, a race, I thought in dismay, that we seemed destined to lose.

The thopter was forty-five minutes out when Atara rested, exhausted, and Zadmer came over to me. "So, you are finally to go to surgery," he said with a grim smile. "You won't ever be able to do this, of course, but with the experience we have gained of late with the other experiments we have performed, I can promise you that you will feel pleasure as a woman."

I stared at him, not understanding. Then it came to me what he was talking about and I felt the blood drain from my face. "No," I whispered and he understood that I didn't know what Gendrick was arranging for me, the opposite of what he had sworn to me. He gave no thought to my fellow cadets that he implied he had blithely cut and cauterized in order to find the best way of making me into a woman for my mad husband.

"Don't tell him I told you, please, my Princess," the Chief Surgeon said, his face seething with desperation. "He's a man who holds it against you if you spoil his surprises."

Atara let out another scream and suddenly began to push and I could see as the mute lifted her legs that the baby's head was right there. The birth began as the thopter landing countdown began.

"Coming right down on the Outer Ward," said a voice in my ear as another said, "It's a boy!" I hurried to the bed as a wail sounded through the apartment.

"Landed," said a voice. "Commence disembarking procedures."

"I need my nurses," said Zadmer most petulantly. "I can't do all this by myself. You there," he said to Barthes. "Prep the child. Cut the umbilical, then come back. There's the afterbirth, you know. You can't expect me or the Princess to clean that up. You *are* here to help, aren't you?"

He was looking in great suspicion at Barthes, who blocked him from leaving my bedroom and going to the console.

"Is he down?" Atara croaked at me.

"Yes," I said. "Disembarking procedures have begun."

“Undermarshal Bregg,” said a voice I knew well, that of my husband. I started but the others paid no attention. I alone had an earjack and could hear the fear-producing voice. “Where is my wife at the moment?”

“Cut the cord,” Atara commanded Zadmer. “Wrap my child up tightly,” she said to me. “You must support his head at all times. Come on, woman, don’t be scared of a little child. Just do what Barthes tells you to do. Now, there’s one more task you must do. Send on Channel Seven the name, Taron. Just that.”

“What’s going on?” asked Zadmer, realizing that all was not what he had thought it was.

“I will meet you, Bregg, outside her apartments,” my husband was talking to an apologetic Undermarshal Bregg, who did not know for certain where I was and was asking stupid questions to cover his ignorance. “No, do not send in her beauticians. She is lovelier than you can imagine when she awakes in the morning. I will surprise her.”

“We have to go,” said an agitated Prince Barthes, helping me with my coat even as I put on my long boots and zipped them up.

“What is going on?” screamed Zadmer just before the mute struck him from behind with the goad across his neck.

“Entering Queen Jerna’s Tower,” said a different voice.

Zadmer was rolling on the floor, screaming as the mute handed me the baby, which she had wrapped tightly in a bundle of blankets. I looked anxiously to the Lady Atara who waved at me feebly.

“Go. Go!” she said hoarsely. “Follow Prince Barthes. He knows the plan from here on. The mute will help me get lost in the servants’ quarters.” She had said that she would be too weak after the birth to do more than hide. She had never intended though, to cut it this close, I was certain.

I heard the roar of the thopter blades and Barthes was running back to me from the windows.

“What’s that? What’s that?” came many voices over different channels of the comset weighing down my shoulder.

Barthes grabbed my arm and hustled me behind the console into the little kitchen area that had been the mute’s. He opened the door that I thought was a food storage cupboard. It wasn’t. The door opened into another apartment, in which I recognized almost immediately a long rack of Lady Atara’s clothing. I knew then that she must have intended to go with us. I half-turned back but Barthes grabbed my arm and pulled me after him.

“A thopter,” said a voice. “A thopter has taken off from the citadel.”

“Track it!” someone yelled.

Barthes went to the door of the apartment and opened it. No one was in the hallway beyond. He hurried me along; the baby made little noses in my arm as Barthes counted doors, opened one and we began a bewildering path through a maze of passages.

We saw several servants, who must have been Niccobians, in white smocks. They fled from his Storm Guard uniform and the glare on his face. When he stopped, I saw we were

at one of the thopter launch pads on a parapet higher than Jerna's Garden. I could see a tower beyond as he looked out the door.

I tried new channels. "The door is jammed," said a man's voice. "We are blowing it now."

"Now," said Barthes quietly, and we walked out to a thopter swaying slightly in the breeze. My stomach churned as I saw how high we were. There was a pilot in front and another guard climbing in beside Barthes and me. For a moment I panicked, thinking that we were caught, then the guard smiled at me and I recognized him. He had waited on me at Lord Chasmun's dinner party in Matona.

"They've tracked the thopter," said the pilot. He boosted his radio and we could distinctly hear the voice of my husband and he was raving.

"Shoot it down! Shoot it down!" he was screaming.

"But majesty," protested the shocked voice of air control. "If it contains the Queen and the heir, we would kill them too."

"On my order, launch your missiles!" shouted my husband.

I flicked through channels as the Storm Guard looked at each other, stunned by what they were hearing. I must admit that I felt a little sick as well.

"Rogue is hit. Repeat, rogue is hit," said an urgent voice.

"Down in the Northwest, on the Athom road," came another voice.

"All thopters launch," came a different voice and the pilots snapped to order.

"Twenty-twenty in the air," our pilot said and we were off as the baby in my arms grimaced and smacked his lips.

Taron, I thought, and then I remembered what I had been told by Atara. I took out the comset from my pocket as the guard looked at me in surprise.

"How did you come by that?" he asked as I set the 'out' indicator to seven.

"Taron," I said into the mike. Reports came in over my earpiece of the debris scattered over several buildings, one on fire, along the Athom road.

"Taron," I repeated again as the thopter joined a flight of others heading out to the Northwest and away from the citadel.

The last words I heard on Bregg's channel were, "Kill every Niccobian in the citadel." The voice that gave the order was that of my husband. "That way we shall avenge Lady Atara and my Chief Physician. Yes, they have given their lives trying to stop the foolish Resistance from kidnapping my wife and my child. The conspirators who directed this affair will surely be in that number."

XIII. GENDRICK'S HUNT

MURUGA. When the dowager Madrens was firmly in control of her Barony of Sancness in the land of Almance, she thought anew of the subterfuge by which she had overcome her son, Labadie.

She might have had the physician, Murug, slain. She chose a different course, however, and had her unwilling accomplice become the repository of those very transforming drugs that had so afflicted her son. She also had him watched more intently so that the Freedom Knife was not allowed to him, as it had been to the young Baron transformed into womanliness by the 'huno' drugs, rediscovered and manufactured by Murug.

The physician, Balcar, thought that Madrens' new handmaiden was Murug's sister. She was exceedingly shy and blushed a great deal when she was given various Lords and lackeys to dance with at the many revels pursued by the dowager. She was trained with Madrens' other handmaids in womanly arts and was a constant performer in dramatic entertainments at the dowager's insistence.

Muruga was the Maiden of Spring in the Great Revel of the Alman Calendar and many men asked Madrens for her hand in marriage. She was betrothed several times that year on Madrens' orders, forced to entertain her would-be lovers daintily at receptions in her honor. No one dared to disobey the tyrant Madrens' instructions. Balcar, from whom this account emanates, writes that Muruga's kisses and attentions were sought by very many men who longed to hold her buxom figure to them while tasting her cherry-red lips.

The plague is a respecter of no one's rank or sex. A black epidemic swept across Almance and carried both of them off, Madrens and Muruga; their bodies were burned together to prevent the plague's further spread. Muruga's diaries went to Balcar, the physician, a student of Murug's. He attests that they revealed Madrens' treachery and her determination to have Muruga transform herself completely, as the diaries revealed, from a man into a woman. She wrote in her last entries that she could not hold out any longer. The drugs were taking hold of her and she wanted to surrender to her latest beau, a young officer in the dowager's service. She also revealed that she was indeed Murug, forced into taking transforming drugs by the woman she had once thought a friend. (From "The Greatest Physician of All," a biography of Murug by Telve Tontrick, a physician at Therenlie, who also wrote a biography of Balcer.)

By some miracle, Lyst, the pilot, managed to turn the thopter enough so that the missile fired by our pursuers struck one of our engines and not a blade, which would have meant certain death. I had transferred the baby to a harness-crib and though it swung wildly, the infant didn't cry out.

"Got them both," said the gunner, the man who sat beside me until we had been abruptly ordered back to the citadel. The pilot and gunner seemed to know right away that they could not go back along with the other thopters. Lyst slipped us away at treetop level and though radar hadn't seen us, eyes in other craft had and we had been pursued by two thopters, who had launched missiles at us.

"Get the traitors!" said a harsh voice on the comset in my ear. I heard him urging more thopters into the chase and demanding the position of the two craft chasing us.

"Off the screen," said the cool voice of air control.

“Explosions in the Northwest,” said a young, excited voice. I noted the change in the position of the sun as we raced along, Lyst swearing and coaxing at the machine to keep it up in the air.

“Fire’s out,” said our gunner. “How long can you keep it up?”

“Just one minute,” grunted Lyst. Suddenly, we slowed and I saw we were settling down beside a wide expanse of water on the road that ran about it. “Out, out!” he yelled and the gunner practically threw us out the door onto a sandy, dusty roadway.

“Lose the Guard uniform!” he yelled at Barthes as he handed me the precious crib. I saw the baby move and murmur as I took it. Then the thopter lurched into the air and headed out over the water. The silence when it cut its engines and dropped like a stone into the water turned me into a fearful statue. I watched it disappear beneath the waves.

Barthes was already out of his uniform and putting on a new grey jacket and brown trousers, then a cap like Niccobian farmers wore. He picked up dust from the road and began daubing it on my coat, changing my lovely black heavy wool coat into a tattered wreck. He scuffed my high-heeled boots quite deliberately and then put a scarf about my head from his pack.

He handed me a cloth and said, “Muss up your makeup. Your eyes and mouth are too pretty.” At that moment, the baby let loose a wail and pulled up its legs in its tight bindings. “You have to attend to it,” he said desperately, as I looked stupidly at the angry, little red face, venting his protests very loudly. “You’re the woman. You should know what to do.”

I know as much as you, I thought, as a breeze blew my dress about. I knew as much as any other man. I tried rocking the cradle as I looked desperately about us. Scraggly trees lined the dusty road that ran around the lake. We could see for miles across the water. In the distance I could hear an engine straining as something came up a small rise in the road and headed



right for us. I recognized the crawler as an old cattle cart and it slowly came to a stop beside us.

“Need a lift?” asked a friendly voice. A lone driver, short and wiry, looked out at us.

“Desperately,” agreed Barthes. “You’ll have to feed him, dear,” he said to me as the baby led out another fearful yammering. He put his arm about me affectionately and I wanted to punch him.

“Going up to Litges,” he said naming a town in the center of the Border Hills. “We’re supposed to meet a bus here. Our last ride told us to wait ten minutes. That was an hour ago before he went haring off down there,” he pointed along the beachy area of the lake, “But I think we’re in the wrong place. Did you see that thopter going by?”

“Sure did,” grinned the old, grey-haired driver. “And don’t you fuss, lady, about wet-nursing your wee one. I’ve six of my own, so I’m used to seeing a little suckling, right?”

So, as shame coursed through me, I had to undo my coat and blouse in the surprising warmth of the cab and loosen my bra. Wouldn’t you know it, the baby attached right onto me and sucked away, even though there was nothing to get. The respite from his bawling was enough, however, to give us all relief. I looked at his dark hair and red face and thought how much he was like a frog, a wrinkled and red frog. I tried not to think of the disturbing and weird feelings circulating in me as I let him suckle on my nipple as a woman might do her newborn.

“He’s very young,” said the driver as I took the little bottle of fortified water from Barthes’ pack and tried to interest him in that. He took a little of it and then wanted me again, finally going to sleep attached to me while the two men smiled at me, while I had to contend with the strange feelings that threatened to overwhelm me in feminine emotion.

“Six days,” said Barthes proudly. “We paid for a ride to Litges but we got dropped and told to wait for the bus and our ride took off back round the lake. Then the thopter went hurtling by us.”

“Smuggling,” said our driver, Tage he called himself. “Way of life up the Border.”

“What would they be smuggling up here?” asked Barthes, acting his puzzlement well.

“Drugs, people, weapons these days,” said Tage with a grin. He thought for a moment and then said, “I do it myself. See my load back there. Tatheni bulls to set out for winter in the ranges above Litges. I got a little cage in there where I put what I want to hide, people sometimes. No inspector ever enters a Tatheni carrier if he values his life.”

He chortled again, then concentrated on his driving for a while as we climbed slowly along the roadway and turned away from the water beside us. We passed a farmhouse and then a group of cots, an estate house amidst orchards and groves at the top of the rise. Two empty haulers passed us in the opposite direction, the only traffic on the road.

The baby went to sleep and I disengaged him from my nipple. I put him back in the carry-crib between Barthes and me, aware of the driver’s eyes watching me adjust my bra and blouse from his strangely positioned side mirror. I could sense that Barthes hadn’t noted that nor the driver’s hints that he guessed we were more than just strays picked up from a forlorn wayside.

I wished I could get the comset out of Barthes' pack. I wondered what our enemies were doing at that moment. I felt Tage's eyes on me again; it was very disturbing. I was glad then that I had a man with me. I didn't want to be a woman alone on the Fells. Then I shuddered at how I had just thought of myself as a woman. Tage noticed and grinned at me.

The two men chatted on about the road and the local estates. I learned that we were passing through Lord Lerrens' holdings. Terrible to have lost three sons in the fighting for Niccobi, said Tage. I remembered the prison cells under the citadel and the line of us prisoners being frogmarched into the baths. I'm sure, I thought, hating the memory, that it was Hennick Lerrens, a cadet a year older than me being treated like me. That caused another shudder. What would Hennick look like now? I really didn't have to think. He would look like me.

In a town called Baslie, we stopped and the baby awoke and began to fuss. "Needs to be changed?" queried Tage as he showed me to the women's station. I flushed at his concern and the way he held my arm as I took Barthes' pack and headed into the almost empty station.

I could hear strong voices outside as I gingerly opened up the baby's wrappings, changed the mess and cleaned him. He yawned and shivered and took my hand, sucking on my fingers. I changed and wrapped him as there came a knock on the door and Tage put his head in. "Inspectors want me to move on," he said. "Don't like the bulls parked in the town. I told them you were my sister."

He gave me that friendly grin again, too friendly, a little voice inside me said, and I felt the stirrings of fear. Barthes was supposed to be buying us food and looking for transport if he could find any. Tage had said he was going up into the Fells. Litges, he'd declared, was a long way out of his route but he'd see us right to Aryst, a small town but an important junction for crawlers going up and back to Therentia.

He waited while I wrapped up the baby; his little arms fought with his clothing until I remembered how the mute had done it and fastened his arms to his sides, then wrapped him. He protested but took a few sips of his sweetwater bottle as I gathered the pack. There were two burly inspectors outside waiting for Tage and me as we came out of the women's station. One wore the uniform of the Border Guard.

Both were angry with Tage for parking where he had. The smell of the bulls assailed my nose, I could understand why. I had grown used to it in the cab. I climbed in, with Tage's hands about my waist, helping me. Barthes, I noted in panic, was not in the cab.

Tage got in the driver's side. "See, Lord Eshal," he sneered through the window at the casually dressed inspector. "I am moving, doing exactly as your lordship commands."

Swear words followed our leaving the station and continued as we swung back onto the dusty roadway. I saw Barthes ahead at a roadside vendor's, holding a bag of fruit. I thought Tage was going to stop but he didn't. As Barthes turned towards us, Tage put his foot on the accelerator and we shot off down the road and into the sparse traffic heading north out of Baslie.

"What are you doing?" I yelled at him, twisting in my seat and trying to find the rear-view mirror. "You've left my husband behind."

Tage snorted and leered at me, scaring me. "More fool him," he said. "Shouldn't ever leave a delectable little morsel like you in another man's care up here in the Fells. Deserves what he gets. Don't worry," he smiled. All I could feel was a terrible fear rising in me, worse than when I knew Gendrick wanted me as a woman. "I'll put you and the babe off at Aryst, after we've had a little fun."

The baby began to fuss again and started crying. "Attend to it," Tage told me brusquely as we sped along a narrow roadway, gravel giving way to dried earth as we bounced along. "He wants the same thing I do," he added, licking his lips with an obscenely long tongue.

I was revolted and scared. I picked up the infant and held him to me, rocking him. Tage laughed at me. "What's the brat's name?" he asked.

I remembered then the message to Lord Chasmun. Little good that had done. "Taron," I said.

"Give him your breast, woman," he said. "That's what he wants."

I quivered inside as I undid my coat and my blouse and turned slightly away from Tage as I put the baby to my breast. He sucked on me right away, tickling me and sending sensations through me. Tage reached over and grabbed my arm roughly, turning me so that he could look at my breasts.

"Milk not come in yet?" he asked with another leer. "Good for me, that."

"You, you don't understand," I began as we passed a cot and entered bush and trees.

He swung the wheel and suddenly we were off the rutted roadway and headed into the bush. "You're the one who doesn't understand," he said. "This is where I bring my bulls for foraging over Wintersend," he said, grinning again. I felt my blood run cold.

We crossed a gate and a little road bridge, a cattle guard he called it, a tangle of metal pipes and holes, and plunged further into the brush. He stopped beside a stream and told me not to get out. In his hand he had a goad that he must have kept somewhere in the door on his side of the cab. "I'm letting the bulls out," he said, "and they'll take out anything that moves after being cooped up so long. Stay put, goldenhair, and Dada will be back in no time."

He went the cab window and up onto the roof and I heard the crash of metallic bars being moved. The cab rocked and the baby clutched more tightly to me. His mouth worked me gently, his tongue tasted me, making me want to wriggle and shiver. He roused feelings in me that I didn't want to think about. Huge, wicked horns went past my window as the Tatheni bulls headed first to the water.

Tage swung back in through the window, blared his horn at a couple that stood in the track barring his way. Then he drove the crawler into one to make it move. We could hear it bawling a challenge as Tage laughed and headed deeper into the track. I didn't dare to get out and run even though I had never been so frightened, of man or beast.

"I'm not throwing you down in the middle of the forest," he said, while I quivered and the baby's suckling became audible. "I've got a bed in my shack up here and a flagon of wine. You can make me supper and pay for your passage to Aryst. I do have to be there tomorrow to pick up some year-old heifers, new to being bred, just like you, little girl."

"You are making a terrible mistake," I said.

"Your husband will kill me," he jeered. "That pipsqueak?"

"My real husband," I said, biting my lower lip in anxiety.

"And who might that be?" he sneered as we approached a weathered, grey-planked shack. "Gendrick the Mad?"

"He's actually very nice to me," I said softly. Shivers ran through me as Tage stopped the crawler violently and gave me a double take.

"Oh, that's a good one," he said, beginning to laugh at me again. "You had me going there for a moment. What's your name, girl? Can't just keep calling you that."

"Princess Rina of Niccobi," I said, shivering. "Queen-to-be of Therentia."

Tage burst out laughing, slapping his knee. "And that young pup with you, that was our Lord Sovereign, was he?"

"No," I answered, knowing that this dangerous buffoon wouldn't believe me anyway. It would be his funeral and I hoped I would live long enough to see it, whether he touched me or not. "He is my lover, Prince Barthes, the third son of the King of Matona."

"And Taron there," he asked in sneering amusement, "is he Gendrick's by-blow or the young prince's?"

"He is Gendrick's heir but he won't bargain with you for him," I said, trying anxiously to make him see that I was telling the truth. I shouldn't have been trying so hard to be a woman in the way I spoke and sat, I thought. I was making myself far too desirable to him. "He's been trying to kill us all day today. You have helped us escape."

Tage shook his head, got out of the cab and came 'round to my side, shaking his head and laughing. I freed myself from the sleeping baby and put him back into his carry-crib. "Girl," he said. "Or should I say, Your Majesty? You can tell a whopper like I never heard before. I hope you go on being sassy. I like girls like that. I like the ones I got to take my belt to."

He put his hands up to me. Frightened, I let him lift me down. He kept me in front of him and pressed me back against the crawler. "Just a little on account," he said, leaning into me and kissing me. His face was rough on me, his lips bruising.

"At least shave and bathe," I said desperately as I pulled my face away, pinned by his body against the door well.

He laughed again. He sniffed at me and raised his eyebrows in appreciation. "You got more of that stuff?" he asked, reaching for the pack. He opened it and found the comset before I thought to stop him.

"What's this?" he asked. "A computer?"

"Better I show you," I said. I tuned the set on while he watched. Shadows of doubt crossed his face as he heard air control issuing orders for a wider perimeter.

"What's the story?" asked another voice.

“The thopter from Jerna’s Tower was a decoy,” said a voice I thought was Bregg’s. “Find a woman and a newborn baby. That’s all we’ve been told. There’s something at Baslie, just come in. Thopter One is on its way.”

“That’s King Gendrick’s thopter,” I told Tage. He frowned at me, still not understanding. “He’ll be at Baslie in an hour. Can’t you hear? My husband will be here very, very soon.”

“Then we don’t have long, do we?” he said, dragging me to his shack. I knew now what he was going to do, so I fought him. I kicked at him with my high-heeled boots and he grabbed me by my hair. I clawed at his face, my nails now weapons that they had never been when I was a man. A roundhouse punch knocked me off my feet and he pounced on me, using his weight and strength to pin me to the path.

“No time to shave and bathe,” he said. The comset gave out more information on Gendrick and where he was in relation to Baslie. Tage tore open my heavy wool coat and he looked down at my dark black and blue silk dress. He tore it down the front and fought with me for my bra, separating it so that my breasts were free. He sank his head to them. His touch was nothing like the baby’s. He was hard and aggressive, sucking violently on me, hurting me. I fought harder to get free of him and he punched me again on the point of my jaw.

I was dazed as he held me down easily. He began again to kiss and caress my feminized skin. I felt only repugnance. He hoisted my dress and began to feel my legs and garters.

“You like that, princess, don’t you?” he sneered, his hard, calloused fingers releasing my stockings. “You want me to take you right here, don’t you? You want your royal lord and master inside you and that’s what you are going to get.”

His hand had reached my panties and he began to fondle me there, unaware that he was still touching something artificial. He tried to insult and shame me even more by asking me if I was a real blonde. I tried to keep him out of my panties.

He was just inches away from his desire, undoing his own belt when we heard the thopters. The comset was saying that Gendrick was an hour from Baslie when a thopter came whirling down almost on top of us, Storm Guards hanging from the open attack doors.

Tage, open-mouthed in shock, stood up, his manhood exposed and alert. He turned and ran two steps towards his shack. Explosives and beams cut him apart, showering me with sticky, smelly blood.

I sat up, pulling my tattered dress down, wrapping the coat about my blood-spattered chest as Storm Guards dropped all around me. One grabbed the comset and turned it off while another climbed into the cab. I saw rapid communication going on. Two thopters landed, followed by a third while more whirled about overhead.

We had hated using them in battle, I remembered numbly as I tried to arrange my dress about my breasts and appear womanly to the men dropping from thopters about me. They were so vulnerable to the missile packs that even the infantrymen had.

“Are you hurt?” one asked and I recognized his voice as the pilot from the landing site on the walls of Niccobi.

“Lyst?” I asked and he nodded. “No, it’s his blood.” I pointed to the squat figure of Tage lying on the path. “After someone killed him, it spattered me.”

Lyst relayed that information to someone else. A tall figure with a goatee beard and mustache got out of the third thopter and headed towards us. In the fading light of the evening, I stood up and turned to meet my husband, striding confidently across the dirt square in front of the shack.

Only it wasn’t my husband. It was Chasmun, the Lord Marshal of Therentia. He nodded to me and I don’t know what made me do it but I curtsied to him. His face broke into a smile. He turned to an aide beside him. “See if there is a bathing facility and hot water in that shack.”

Chasmun came up to me and put his arm about my quivering shoulders. I don’t know why but I was overcome by strange, girlish, feelings, like when I suckled the baby. He frowned at me. My jaw felt puffy. “You’ve been hit, my Queen,” he said. I thought for a moment that he would spit on Tage’s corpse.

“He-he wanted me,” I said and he nodded. “You saved me this time.”

His face clouded. His aide came running to report that the shack had no running water inside.

Chasmun looked at me and then to the Guard beside me, the pilot Lyst. “At Baslie, then,” he said. He lifted his com unit and spoke to someone about having a wet nurse meet us there as well.

A Guard came out of the crawler with the baby. I hadn’t realized the Guard was a woman. “This way, my Queen,” said Chasmun and he took his arm from me and stayed several feet away.

Then I caught his manner of address. I quivered. “You mustn’t call me that,” I gasped as he indicated that I must lead him to the landed thopter.

He accompanied me to the large thopter, where several men and women were occupied at consoles. They paid us only scant attention as I got in and was strapped again by a woman into a comfortable chair.

We landed in a more luxurious district of the town; I was taken to what must have been a hotel and allowed to soak in a private, warm bath. My clothes disappeared, save for my familiar disguise, which I had to reapply to myself, being far from my ‘home’ in Niccobi.

I dressed in fresh panties and bra, dark stockings and a dark-red Niccobian dress. It was low-cut, tucked in at the waist, accentuating my figure and surrounding me with the flowing skirts that I was now well used to. I had my clean hair re-braided. I was able to do my makeup myself quickly, so used was I to the routine, to the surprise of the woman Chasmun sent me.

A young woman arrived with Taron and another child, her own she informed me. She would love to be wet nurse to the prince; she praised me for looking after such a newborn so well in such difficult times. Carra declared that she could never have done it.

Then Gendrick arrived. I heard the thopter arrive. Fear rose inside me and ugly memories crowded my mind as I forced myself to go to the front window of the suite I had been given. I saw his thopter land in a grassy area not intended for such. I saw that Bregg was with him. I looked in vain for Chasmun. The only Guards outside my room that I could find to ask were Lyst and another who sounded very much like the gunner from the thopter that had fallen or been deliberately dropped into the lake.

Gendrick swept in and stopped. "I want to talk to my wife alone," he said to Undermarshal Bregg, who hesitated before withdrawing as if he disagreed with me being alone with Gendrick.

"So, you betrayed me after all," he said angrily. "How much does the Resistance know about you? What will they think of you when I reveal the truth about you and your sisters?"

I shuddered. "Do what you will." It was a wonder that I could talk to the man who was going to kill me at all. "You gave me to Lady Atara and the plot was hers."

He smiled faintly. "If I could just trust you," he said slowly, "would you be my wife fully and completely and never stick one of these," he tossed the assassin's knife, the same one the Stertian mute had given me, onto a chair beside me, "into any part of me?"

I shivered. "I would stick into myself," I said and he nodded.

"I would still make you my Queen," he said in a voice which chilled me to the bone even more than his anger and threats. "With Zadmer's help, one day you would be the true mother of our next son."

He saw the disgust and horror in my face I couldn't conceal. He turned and went to a console in the wall. "Bring him in," he said.

The entrance door opened and Bregg, with a smug look on his face, had a battered Prince Barthes hauled in and thrown on the ground in front of me. "Give me your cutter-beam," Gendrick ordered Bregg. He ushered out all others before he came over to me.

"This one claims he is your lover," he said. "A fine lover, isn't he, who describes you as the most wonderful woman in the world. He doesn't even know that you are not Princess Rina." I saw the shock on Barthes' swollen face. "He doesn't know you are not his little Reenya, but an imposter Atara trained. Worse, your lover does not even know that you are not a woman. But perhaps, like me, it doesn't matter to him at all. Shall we ask him?"

"You filthy liar," spluttered Prince Barthes.

"Gendrick raised the cutter-beam, aimed it at Barthes, and fired.

Nothing happened. He tried it again. He banged it on the edge of the chair in front of him just as the door opened. Chasmun entered with Lyst and the other Storm Guard. Chasmun looked at me and nodded. Relief flooded into me. I would have flung myself into his arms but I knew Gendrick would have killed him if I did.

"You want Prince Barthes of Matona dead, murdered by the Lord Sovereign of Therentia?" asked Chasmun. He carried a recorder and switched it on. It was a tape of Gendrick admitting he had killed that bitch Atara and ordering his Storm Guards to kill his fleeing wife and child.

"What is this?" asked Gendrick. He touched a button on the console. There was no response.

"The sixteen Houses Major of Therentia are appalled," said Chasmun, his tone a match for Gendrick's. "They support me in this, a new Regency," he added. "By the way, your decision to allow Almans into the Storm Guard was a most enlightened policy, one I wish to extend."

Gendrick folded his arms and frowned. "Traitor," he said calmly. "You are planning regicide."

"This is Lyst," said Chasmun, his voice equally calm. "And his brother, Coggatt. Did you know in Almance that when you give a man the price of his woman, you are considered wed? Lady Atara, you see, was not your concubine. She was your wife. She was from the moment you threw those fifty gold pieces after Lord Werrens and told him it was a deal and you would take his betrothed. Now I wish to introduce you to your brothers-in-law who have something to say to you."

Two cutter beams reached Gendrick simultaneously. I turned away as an aroma of roasted meat filled the room. Chasmun came to me, put his arms about me and hugged me. I buried my head into his shoulder and hugged him back. I didn't want him ever to stop. "So now you are truly a Queen," he said gently while behind him I saw Prince Barthes throwing up.

XIV. OTHERS

DETHERA. To thwart the wishes of powerful nobles seeking his death, Roter of Lisie was forced to disguise himself in female clothing in order to escape. While he was thus disguised, he was able to leave Lisie but his caravan fell in with that of a daughter of a powerful merchant-baron of Ustrathe.

Yassina was much intrigued by the gauche, but clearly well educated woman travelling in the train of merchants of Lisia. Since 'Dethera' was not a Lady, Yassina paid an exorbitant price and acquired Dethera as her maid, an honorable estate for those not of the blood. So Roter, or Dethera, was separated from his city and fellow countrymen with no hope of returning.

When or how Yassina learned of Dethera's true sex is uncertain. She knew of it long before her father who was informed of the deception by a jealous rival, after praising 'her' graceful performance in a Lovers' Dance with a male partner. Perhaps if Yassina had not made such an effort to glamorize and make Dethera so femininely attractive, jealousy might not have been aroused.

Yassina begged so piteously for Dethera's life, and for her own, that her father relented, even going so far as assenting to a marriage between the two to legitimize the child Yassina was carrying.

The story lacks a happy ending, however, for Yassina tired of playing with her doll-like husband. She divorced him but refused to let go his articles of servitude. When she remarried, she re-

tained the services of her ex-husband as her maid. She enjoyed flaunting herself before the hapless Dethera. Lord Thalles, Yassina's new husband, was informed by a jealous servant of the situation and killed the luckless Dethera who was buried by his late wife, so it is said, in his most beautiful golden silk dress. (From "Tales of the Far East," by Etabar Norennie. This tale is often left out of compilations but can be found in libraries in Astra's larger cities).

The brunette was in charge of her audience from the moment she walked out to the pole and grasped it. She flicked away her loose skirt and lifted herself from the floor and twirled about the pole, her bare, gorgeous legs totally exposed to her panting and sexually charged audience.



I leaned back in our private booth, glad of the shadows to hide my blushes. Chasmun turned to me, sensing my embarrassment. "We don't have to stay," he whispered. I nodded. But I did have to. I had to watch the girl flick her long, dark hair about her exquisitely madeup, feminized features. Her dark brown eyes seductively surveyed those watching her avidly.

Her breasts were large and round. If she had had implant scarring, it was long gone; when she touched her breasts, they moved most naturally. Her tiny thong did not last long. She was coy about tossing that to a man who took it. He looked like he was in heaven as she spread her legs and revealed the perfection of her female state. I would not have known her as Lieutenant Golon Nimerun, as she waggled her wide, feminine buttocks to her admirers, in rhythm to the music. He had always been so strait-laced, a bore really.

Shamira, the name she now used, was one of six who had survived Zadmer's experiments, Chasmun explained. He had bought time with her after her performance. She expected it was for him to have her. She, my old buddy on many a midnight watch, was a prostitute as well as a dancer.

Chasmun had tried to fulfill all the requests I had made of him in Matona, even when it showed him in a poor light. I couldn't blame him. I had done shameful things too just to stay alive. Now I had to watch this, the utter debasement of a friend and colleague, a young man when I knew him, now teasing and arousing those who had tormented him.

She twirled nimbly on her high heels as one of the men in the crowd rose. He was a Therentian soldier, out of uniform, but you could always tell by the close haircut. She let him put money in the garter she wore just above her left knee. Then she leaned forward on one knee and kissed him on the mouth, covering him with red lipstick while his friends roared at him. Each man had to pay her for kisses; some she let kiss different parts of her anatomy, reacting as if she felt intense pleasure at their touches. Every so often she broke from the attentions of one man to dance, nude, across the stage, hurling herself about the pole so that everyone could see her hairless, perfectly formed, vagina.

I was trembling as we were ushered into a bed-sitting room above the club by a curious usher. He couldn't understand why a woman like me would be in such a tatty club. Other men were being ushered into other rooms. Some were leaving, adjusting their clothing. Many were soldiers free from duty in the citadel.

My hair was in a tight ball underneath my dark wig. Colored lenses that made everything seem quite dark to me concealed my eyes. I hadn't tried to conceal my figure. I thought my breasts were large. They seemed alien to me, especially during my visits to the other prisoners who had been picked out in the citadel with me. But they weren't anything in comparison to the large breasts of the women we had seen in the so-called floorshow. I was nothing beside Shamira.

I wore a conservative, dark brown dress and dark stockings. My dress was long, and rustled as I moved. There was no point hiding that I was Niccobian and not wearing the soft, folded under-slip that we Niccobian women wore. Nimerun would know my high blood accent anyway.

The woman announced as Shamira entered the room and paused, looking at me in surprise. "You want your wife to watch?" she asked, fastening a short, black dress loosely under her heavy breasts, and shaking her long black hair. Her heavy musk perfume reminded me of Atara and another, terrible interview.

Chasmun poured three glasses of amber Badoni. Now he handed one to her, intending, I think, to relax her. She took it and caressed the glass, arching her back as she ran the cool wine glass over her partly exposed breasts. She sauntered to the bed. "Or would you like me to do it with her and you watch?" she asked, vamping the Lord Regent as she perched on the side of the bed. I was surprised that she did not know him.

"We are here to right a wrong done to you, Lieutenant Golon Nimerun," I said quietly. She went deathly still. She jerked her hair and her huge golden band earrings jiggled against her neck. Her hand trembled as she put her drink on the table; her long, bright red nails were a match for her glossy mouth.

She stared at me, trying to work out who I was, I supposed. I was under strict orders from Lord Chasmun not to tell her. "You know me?" she asked huskily, a frown on her well madeup face. "That must make you Therentian even if you dress Niccobian and speak with a Niccobian accent. What more can you do to me? Give me back my penis and testicles or do you just want these back?" She cupped her breasts as if she could give them to us.

"Are you taking mahuno?" asked Chasmun as Shamira glared at me.

She turned slightly and smiled coquettishly at him. "Can't do you without it," she said. "But you could do me. It's well worth it for you, though, lover. Hun makes me feel womanly all over. Once I start with you, it will be a night you will never forget. So take off your jacket and come join me." She patted the bed beside her, smiling at him.

"You're loaded with it," Chasmun said in disgust.

She knitted together her fine, thin eyebrows and swayed towards him. "Let me show you how it helps us both," she almost whispered, her voice and arching figure so seductive and arousing that I don't know how Chasmun could remain cool.

"She's not Nimerun any more," said Chasmun in disgust, standing.

"I'm all woman," she murmured, moving to him, rubbing against him. "Come and see me with Hathick in our live show. He's so-o-o big and strong. Size matters, doesn't it?" She reached for Chasmun's pants belt, but he stopped her. He got out his wallet.

"Seen enough?" he asked me. I gulped and sorrowfully looked at the attractive woman.

I nodded and stood up. My own dress made its little whisper as I moved but I hardly felt womanly at all despite all the pretty things I wore beneath my dress. I still used my artificial aid inside my panties. I only used Hun, as Shamira had called it, to keep my figure; on those days I tossed and turned in my bed and had the most vivid dreams of the things I had done with my late husband. Sometimes I awoke thinking he was still alive.

Chasmun tossed money on the bed and hustled me to the door. A tough guard stepped threateningly along the hallway as we came out of the room.

"Hathick," cooed Shamira from the doorway behind us. When he saw the money she was waving, Hathick's face broke into an easy smile and he almost loped into the room. She flung her arms about him and he hugged her, one hand already gripping her between her legs, which she reacted to in pleasure. He kicked the door shut as he buried his mouth in hers.

"You heard her," said Chasmun quietly, putting my quivering arm through his as he led me out of the club. "Mahuno makes her life bearable. She could never take man after man after man as she does without it. And to buy it, to keep herself a woman, she has to buy more and more. How else could she afford such a drug except by prostituting herself?"

"To make a Queen of me, you did that to her?" I asked bitterly. Then I was sorry as I saw the pain on his face. He was my friend, my only true friend. He had steadfastly supported me as the Sixteen, the heads of the major Therentian houses, had settled the terms

of the Regency of my son and the autonomous status of the Kingdom of Niccobi, which I now ruled, if in name only.

“Reneth and Zadmer,” he said. He didn’t repeat that the two had used prisoners as experimental animals. He asked me, grey-faced and shaken, if I wanted the details. I said that I did and then he had presented me with the information I had asked him for back in Matona.

Only six had ultimately survived all the operations that had been performed on them. All of them had their genitals transformed in different ways as Zadmer and his surgeons sought the best way to transform a man into a pleasure-receiving woman. It had been part of Gendrick’s private instructions to Zadmer that the new woman be able to achieve a female orgasm. It had taken them several tries to get it right.

Reneth had the ideas, it seemed, and Zadmer carried them out. They had transplanted from women, and poor Lerret was even pregnant for a short time before rejection of his transplanted parts had taken place. Lerret had been allowed to expire and his body was cremated.

“I had Detter, Helena that is, talk to Nimerun before we saw her,” Chasmun said. “Shamira knew her and they had a long talk but it went just like the others. She doesn’t want to be a man again, Helena said. Reneth did his job too well. She was given to the soldiers as a battle whore and they abused her badly. It would have been awful if she had been a woman, not a man in a woman’s body, which she was. She was bought out by a pimp, she says, who treated her well and lifted her from the gutter and quick tricks, as she put it. She thinks this work in the club is wonderful and she doesn’t think life can get any better for her.”

He stopped me on the bottom step and offered me a tissue. I didn’t even know that I was crying. I suddenly had a vision that this was the life Gendrick intended for me after he finished with me.

“They all know that they can’t go back; they know the ridicule they would go through if they tried,” said Chasmun, putting his arm about me to comfort me. “I know you want to turn back the clock and put things right. But that’s not the world we have inherited, is it?”

“An actress, a model, a singer, a chorus girl, a hostess and a prostitute,” I said bitterly. “The pride of Niccobi’s officer class. I should include princess and queen in that list. No wonder we called him Gendrick the Mad. He deserved the name.”

“And what atrocities would be performed on more innocents among our troops, Life Corps officers,” asked Chasmun, “if you let this knowledge out?”

He took my hand and helped me into the chauffeured, dark car outside the garish entry to the club, with its neon signs promising ‘Girls, Girls, Girls.’ If its clients had known that this was once the Officers’ Club for the Storm Guard, and every girl there to service the officers had been a former man, would they have fled in horror? I seriously doubted it as I looked at Nimerun’s picture, on an enlarged poster, beckoning me, smiling in welcome, his large breasts and enhanced cleavage the centerpiece of the shot.

Helena was the lucky one. A young officer had fallen in love with her and taken her out of the Club where she was officially listed as a hostess. She had learned to dance with men, to hold conversations with them, to groom herself into a beautiful young lady and to have sex with any officer who asked her to go to bed with him.

"It was all a deception of course," she told me. "No money changed hands. The stewards who bought me from Reneth paid me. If the officers hadn't liked me as a woman, I would have ended up like Nimerun and little Muttie, a soldier's whore. For Muttie, it was worse because they didn't operate on him at first, just gave him to the men. When they found out he was one of the castle's defenders, you can imagine how popular he became and the indignities they heaped on him in public, in their club. His stories terrified me when he finally got the cut, like me, and we were together recuperating in Brossin's Tower."

I was not able to imagine Helena as Detter any more as we sat in her beautifully decorated house off Principal Square, in sight of the citadel. "How can you stand it," I asked her, "living here, in sight of that?"

"Oh, that's all done with now," she had said with a smile at us both, Chasmun having insisted on accompanying me. He told me later how odd he felt watching the two of us, attractive young ladies, so prettily dressed, with our long hair so artfully arranged, our faces made up, sipping tea together and leaving lipstick traces on our cups. He hated to remind me of it, but we were both, in reality, young men.

"It made me break out in a sweat," he told me. "It might have appeared that I was the only man in the room but, in fact, we *all* were men. We should have been swapping our war stories."

"We were," I said to him gently. Then I gave him a kiss, which totally threw him off balance.

"Now that you are Queen and Gendrick is dead, we can move on and forget," Helena said earnestly.

"There's nothing you want?" I pleaded. "Nothing I can put right for you?"

She shook her blonde hair. It was dyed to resemble mine, she giggled to me, as every man in Niccobi wanted to sleep with me, Queen Rina, now that I was single again. It kept her husband happy that she looked like a princess. "I don't want anyone working on me, trying to make me a man again, if that is what you are thinking," she said.

"Wasn't it awful becoming a woman?" I asked, looking at the marriage ring she wore proudly.

"It was awful," she said. "I prayed to die many times. I could have killed myself but I didn't. I just couldn't, even at the lowest points. It wasn't cowardice. It was just that I really wanted to live. I thought I would get all those bastards back in the end. You know, line them all and cut them off as they cut mine. But someone else took care of that."

Helena looked at Chasmun and considered. It was widely bruited about that he had been the one to kill Gendrick.

"I-I *would* like something from you if you don't mind," Helena said apologetically.

"If I can," I responded eagerly.

"Well, I'd like to be a writer some day, a historian actually," she said, flushing. "I've been researching about, well, girls like me. Did you know that in Opar, there are so many that they call us 'geecee' girls, gender-corrected girls, I think it stands for? There's even supposed to be a whole school of us there but that's just a myth as far as I've been able to tell. It's based on one lurid memoir.

"Anyway, to get myself established as a serious writer, could you, do you think, give me an interview about Gendrick, what really happened and so on?"

"I'd love to," I said, glancing toward Chasmun who looked up from the paper he was studying, shaking his head in alarm. He knew what I wanted to say in public and he didn't want any of it revealed at all.

"I wonder why they did it to us," said Helena, pouring more tea into my little cup. "I have never been able to figure that out. Why didn't they just kill us? They kept it all so secret. It's the one thing that I never want to write about, what happened to me and the others, but I would like to know why they did it."

"When we know," I said to her, touching her hand, as soft, feminine and manicured as my own, "we will certainly make sure that you know. Is your husband a writer too?"

She shook her head and smiled. "Virro rarely reads anything these days. He says you can't believe what you read in books. It's all fiction, the stuff the winners write," she said.

I recalled her earlier account of how she had met and married her husband. She hoped not to be ostracised for what she had once possessed beneath her lovely dress.

"It was friendship at first," she said. "We both liked the same things, music and such. He knew I was a hostess but he was never abrupt with me as some of the officers were. He had sex with me, as all the officers did; I took the huno then so I could get through it. Reneth made us all take it when we worked for him. I forgot my huno one night; Virro wanted me and it wasn't so bad. He was always so gentle. He bought me from Reneth and hid me when the Storm Guard went on the rampage after Gendrick was killed. I know Shamira and Frilla were raped many, many times.

"He took me into the cathedral and we were married. I had a dress just like yours, Majesty, but that wasn't the best part. That was my wedding night. I'll never forget my wedding night. I expected it to be like it always was. I don't know how it happened. As we made love, something happened to me. I had an orgasm. I think it must be like a woman feels, like *you* feel, Majesty, if I could describe it rightly. We were supposed to fake them at the Officers' Club but the men didn't care what we felt, really.

"When Meravon took me that night, and told me he loved me, I wanted to please him and it started. It was thrilling. I lost all control of my body. I was on fire! It happens all the time now and he loves it when I convulse and lose control. It's such a wonderful feeling. I could never be Detter, not again, not after being married to such a wonderful man as my husband."

We stayed, Chasmun and me, and met Virro Meravon, Helena's 'perfect' husband. He had been out trying to persuade Public Works to grant him a construction contract. He didn't think he'd gotten it.

"You will have it," I assured the pair, clinging together lovingly. The way they were looking at each other, they were hoping we would leave early, I surmised. "Come up to the citadel and see me," I begged Helena. "It would be so lovely to have a woman my own age to talk to."

Virro looked pleased at that and hugged Helena 'round her slim waist.

"You'll have to be very careful," said Chasmun as we drove the short distance to the citadel and the royal apartments.

I pulled a face at him and he smiled at me. "Seriously," he said. "I persuaded you to go on for Taron's sake, blackmail on my part. But you might say something inadvertently incriminating to someone like Helena, and then there'd be confirmation of all the lurid stories Prince Barthes has told about you to the Matonan press."

I thought of Atara and her son now on the throne as she had planned. No, I wouldn't jeopardize his rule. I wouldn't have Barthes killed either as Chasmun wanted from the start. I could have promised Chasmun I'd be careful but I didn't know if I would think that way always. Helena deserved to know why she had been made into the attractive woman she was today. Each time I looked at my panties and the artificial disguise, I thought of her being paraded in such a device before me in the citadel. I might tell her everything some day.

Shamira was the last one Chasmun had taken me to visit. He also showed me reports on Lady Cadella who had left Opar a step ahead of the Storm Guard 'specials' that he had risked war to send over the border. She had taken her daughters with her when she ran. While Chasmun said he would never stop chasing her, to all intents and purposes she was gone and my brothers were lost.

Prince Barthes of Matona was also gone. Gone as mad as Gendrick, according to most people. He was telling the world about me but no one was listening. He had no proof and I had my son, the second Gendrick, King of Therentia, while I was Queen Regent there. We still called him Taron in private. I couldn't bear to mouth the word 'Gendrick' if I didn't have to.

I was also Queen, and my son was a prince, of Niccobi. He was the future King here. Chasmun said it had to be that way or Atara would have died for nothing. I couldn't make my public confession. I had to act like a queen. I was a queen, I pointed out to him, like the strange men in the Deviants' Quarter. He burst out laughing and told me I was nothing like them.

Chasmun was around me all the time, helping, organizing, and refusing all offices himself. He had his eyes on just one job, he said. When I asked him what it was, he wouldn't

tell me. I had to sit on Gendrick's Regency Council; I told them I wouldn't accept unless he was on it, too. He relented and took that post.

As Helena said, it was friendship first that grew between us. He was my escort whenever I needed one as Queen. I knew what would happen as I remained a woman; I saw no way I could gracefully bow out of being Queen without destroying all of our lives. I knew what would happen when he acted as my maid after a hectic day chasing my son who was teething and being a pest. Chasmun gave me a back rub in my private apartments and kissed me gently as I lay against him sleepily.

He took me to bed and stayed with me. I thought, he's always been a good friend; if he wanted to know what it was like, he might as well find out. He was gentle, shifting at just the right moments, accommodating me, as Gendrick never had. I wasn't merely servicing him as I had been with Gendrick. That had soured me and made me think that that was what love between men and women like me had to be like.

With Chasmun, as I tried to help his pleasure, he insisted on helping me. When he lay between my legs, stroking me, then gently entering me, I kissed him and clung to him, lifting my legs about him at just the right moment. I did have something go on inside me, just as Helena had described, that turned me into quivering jelly. Chasmun says it was an orgasm. When we tried it again the following night, the ecstasy returned. We have never slept apart since.

As Queen, I had to ask him to marry me. He said, "At last, that's the job I've always wanted." He became my consort and the father my son needed. He was much more of an influence on Taron, as we called him privately, than I, a mere woman, ever was.

XVI. INCONTROVERTIBLE EVIDENCE

TARRA. Almost everyone today has heard of Tarra Dostal, the telecast star from Niccobi Films. Her famous screen kiss with Noron Wanayt, she lying on the beach, with her underclothes barely covering any part of her, as he awakens her from 'drowning,' is famous the world over. It partly inspired the boom in filmmaking in Niccobi that made many in the city very wealthy under Queen Rina's enlightened rule.

Tarra Dostal was married twice to other telecast stars. Rumours of an unsavoury past were brushed aside as she became a top moneymaker for the new industry. The revelation that Tarra had once been a man shook the entertainment world and focussed attention on G.C. girls, gender-corrected girls. The subject became for a time all that anyone could talk about on interview shows.

It took Tarra a while to admit it publicly but she found that times had changed enough that she was not subject to any penalty in law and her notoriety provided her with a steady stream of telecast parts and nightclub engagements, a far cry from the club, where she was once a main attraction.

The dark-haired, voluptuous actress even married a third time, to her agent, and promised a biography, which she has not written yet. Her fame is reinvigorated with each revelation in this modern age of geecee girls, such as newscaster Frilla Pertick, and former fashion model Yena Cardenie,

now a dress designer, who were simply accepted as what they are, married women. (From the authorized biography, "The Boy Princess of Niccobi", by Helena Meravon.)

The Meravon biography was published five years after the death of ex-Queen Rina of Niccobi (She resigned in favor of her son when he attained his twenty-fifth birthday). What was not published at the time were Helena Meravon's interviews with the Ostericks, the sisters, Jutara and Marona, whom she tracked to Opar.

Helena Meravon describes the setting of her second interview, fifteen years after the first with Lady Marona Osterick and her consort, Lady Linna Tuvon, in the following pre-amble.

"We met in an open, sunny veranda of a large house in an estate that overlooked the Perfumed Sea. The sounds of children laughing outside were mixed with the sound of sea-birds and a servant girl who was entertaining the children by playing popular songs on the guitar.

"Two women came to meet me in the short summer dresses that had become the fashion in Opar. Indeed, long Niccobian gowns seemed horribly dated then, even in Niccobi. The women came in arm-in-arm and I noted right away that Linna was pregnant again and had let her hair go back to its normal chestnut brown color. Marona was as blonde as ever, her hair falling loosely onto her neck. The first thing you noted about her was her thin waist and high breasts, just as pert as when she was a young girl at my first interview.

"Neither needed makeup to be womanly but they were subtly made-up. Linna confided in me once before that she felt she had to keep up with Marona, who was so much prettier than her, and turned too many men's heads if Linna didn't try to compete with her.

"They smiled at me and came and gave me hugs in greeting, each wearing a different expensive scent. Marona's plunging neckline revealed a bustline any telecast star would die for. When she sat and crossed her shapely legs in a rustle of her flirty dress, I realized that her smooth, tanned legs were not covered in stockings as etiquette in the North demanded.

"Linna saw my eyes go to Marona's legs and she teased her consort about being so sluttish in front of her guest. Marona protested that she had come in from sunbathing and would be taking the children back to the beach after our interview.

"'You should see the skimpy sunsuit she wears, too,' laughed Linna. 'The men on the ridge with their telescopes have their eyes bulging out of their heads.'"

"Marona gave a feminine pout and we settled on long chairs and began to talk."

APPENDIX C. THE LATER INTERVIEW WITH MARONA AND LINNA

ME: I don't quite understand how you two are allowed to live here.

LINNA: *You mean because of the Morality Laws?*

MARONA (giggling): *She wants to see our brands. But you see, dear Helena, I don't fit into that barbaric category that you would call a man. I returned here after Cadella died in Lisie and was accepted as her daughter right away.*

LINNA: *You were a woman. I could attest to that. I saw you in the baths, you and Jutara both, in the Academy, enough times to know that you both were women. No, what the Council thinks is that we are lesbians-*

MARONA: *Which is what we are.*

LINNA: *And, surprisingly, there is no law against women consorting with women.*

MARONA (giggling again): *But Lord Sater wants to get that changed.*

LINNA (smiling): *You should have danced with him at the last Solstice Ball. You could have taken him in the Ladies' Invitation.*

MARONA: *Out into the gardens! Like you and that Southern stallion!*

LINNA: *It was purely platonic. The man didn't know anything of our customs such as taking a woman to the arbors and what is supposed to take place.*

MARONA: *You taught him well. You came back with your makeup mussed, the flowers in your hair were missing and your dress was creased. Should I mention that in polite company?*

LINNA: *You do and I've a list to give Helena, starting with that walk you took with Choromal along the seashore last week. Do you want to explain what I found inside your sunsuit when you came in after sundown?*

MARONA (blushing): *We're giving you a terrible impression of how we entertain ourselves, Lady Helena.*

ME: I find it fascinating. Society does seem to tolerate you as a lesbian couple, however. They don't know that you, Marona, or your sister, Jutara, are geecee girls. Did you know from the start, Linna?

LINNA: *I didn't know at all, at first. We were friends at the Academy. We went to the same slumber parties and the same dances. As far as I knew, the girl in the same school uniform as me, right from before we budded, which is what we called our breasts and pubic hair coming in, and bleeding and so forth, did all the same things I did, including wearing her pad at her time of the month. I've always thought of her as a girl.*

MARONA: *I think I told you last time that it was after the Council Revels, when we went back together and Linna asked me stay over and we were giggling over the boys we had danced with, that she kissed me and I kissed her back.*

LINNA: *I was panicking after what I had done. Suddenly was kissing me harder than I kissed her, then we started touching.*

MARONA: *She confessed that she was a lesbian, that she didn't like to be penetrated by men, and she felt awful that she'd involved me.*

ME: And you felt the need to confess?

MARONA: *Not at first. I just told her I was a lesbian as well. I never thought I would love her as I did. So, when we decided to live together, I had to explain what Cadella did to Jutara and me.*

LINNA: *It was awful of Cadella, wasn't it? If I had known, well, I couldn't have done anything and it didn't work out so badly, did it? I would have hated Marona if she had been a man. I'd have had nothing to do with him.*

ME: That first time I met you, you were very much in love, but you did regret, as I remember, that you would never have children. From what I hear and see, you've reconciled that difficulty.

LINNA (after a pause while both looked at each other): *Shall I tell her or do you want to be the one? He was, after all, your brother.*

MARONA: *We spoke to you briefly last time about my brother, Buron, who was killed in the fighting at Niccobi. I don't know if you remember that. Queen Rina wrote us, Jutara and me, that the Ashun holding had been given to the Gerderas family and thus to a Lady Geray Kerth, whom I'd never heard of. Jutie knew her. The Queen offered us an enormous indemnity for it and new estates, which is how we acquired this place. We talked to you then. I suppose it was you who reported to the Queen what we had said, because she wrote to us and suggested that we could adopt. We thought about it but we would have liked our own child. I tried to persuade Linna to take a man-*

LINNA: *You're the one who likes to be penetrated, not me, thank you.*

MARONA: *-but she wouldn't. I said that in a letter I wrote Queen Rina when she pledged us money to educate the children. We had more than enough then because the Osterick trading house started blooming with the short hauling business it got from Niccobi and the courts upheld Cadella's claim. That's something else that the Queen paid us for that we only learned from a court judge later on.*

LINNA: *Then a doctor came here; a woman named Murrissay, employed by Niccobi, and told us about in vitro fertilization. She said she was born by that method. I didn't mind giving her my eggs and having them fertilized but by whom, that was the problem. I wanted Marona's child and I cursed Cadella for making it impossible.*

MARONA: *Murrissay said that it might be possible. She said that dear Buron had made donations to some kind of sperm bank, as had our father, before they went into battle. That was one way. Another was to fertilize my egg, using Osterick sperm, and then inject stuff they would take from my cells into that, taking out its own. Very experimental but she wanted to try it.*

LINNA: *We thought about it. It was so farfetched an idea. We finally agreed to use Buron's sperm and my eggs. Murrissay put them back in you and we can see the result.*

MARONA: *Three healthy children, two boys and a girl, who look more like me than I do.*

LINNA (patting her stomach): *This is the last one. Murrissay still has my eggs but she only has enough sperm for two more attempts. This is the one we let her experiment on. This is the one that will really be Marona's child more than it is mine.*

ME: The Queen of Niccobi did all this for you? And has she done something for Jutara as well?

MARONA: *Linna offered Jutara some of her unused eggs and we talked about it. She's been married to Gorallie for a long time and raised his two children and fostered a huge group of his*

nieces and nephews on that ranch they have in the Fells. She's still beautiful, you know, and all the children dote on her.

*I think Jutara was weakening the last time she came here and saw all the little blonde Ostericks running around. She is **so** motherly, you know. She ought to have her own children. She talked about surrogate mothers, which Murrissay said could be used. Jutara is scared about how much we've told Murrissay, the Queen, and you about our problems. She thinks we shouldn't be so open.*

ME: Have you actually met the Queen? Has Jutara?

MARONA: *Yes, we had to visit her there in Niccobi, though. They won't let her travel, the Regency Council, not after all the terrible things they say about her in Matona. Isn't that Prince Barthes just awful?*

*She is **so** beautiful, isn't she? And she was so kind to us all. She cried when she met us and all our children played together.*

LINNA: *She cried more when we left. I was so jealous. She hugged Jutara and you so much that I thought for a while that she was a lesbian as well.*

MARONA: *I thought you were jealous of her because of Lord Chasmun? What a gorgeous man he is!*

LINNA: *Ooh yes! He was nice to us. He wasn't at all appalled at us as so many people are when they find out that we love each other. He was very understanding. He almost, almost I said, made me wish that I wasn't a lesbian. But then Rina came in and as soon as you see them together, you know that you have no chance with him.*

MARONA: *I know. They are so in love. I hope we will be in love like that after we have been married as long and our children grow up.*

LINNA: *I don't know how they do it. Everyone else we know seems to have a mistress or a boyfriend on the side. We are the only ones I know who are open about it. We'd love to have a man around for both of us to play with for a while. We just haven't been able to convince one to stay yet. I don't think they like it when Marona comes on to me. Rina and Chasmun seemed to understand. That's what made me think she might be geecee at first.*

MARONA: *(laughing) Rina can't be a geecee girl, as Barthes says, and a lesbian as well! Anyway, she has such beautiful babies with Lord Chasmun and that has put an end to the rumours at last, thank goodness.*

She sends us this special perfume we wear. Isn't it gorgeous? She was wearing it when we met her. I think of her each time I wear it. She shared so many secrets with us on how to be a beautiful woman. If I had a big sister, I would have liked one like Queen Rina.

Lady Helena Meravon's final unpublished note is cryptic. "Could Buron Osterick really be alive? He and Princess Rina look so much alike that they could have been twins. Could he really have been the woman we all know as Princess and Queen Rina?

"Impossible! I was friends with both of them and a womanlier woman than Rina I have never known. She and Chasmun were so much in love. She did have her last two children

with Chasmun by surrogacy, which is not generally known. She asked me to keep the secret until she was dead.

“If there was an ounce of credibility in Prince Barthes’ story, it might prove that Buron Osterick was Queen Rina. Prince Barthes claims his conversation with Gendrick the Mad is incontrovertible evidence that this was so, but Gendrick never gave, even to Barthes, by his own admission, the identity of the so-called man he married. Barthes has been laughed at ever since Rina gave birth to Princess Atalla. He got into a rage with a vid interviewer about that, saying that the man was doubting the integrity of a royal person.

“But I should note here that if Buron Osterick saved his semen before the battle of Nicobi, he did it ten years before Balceran in Astra perfected in vitro fertilization and twenty years before the technique was brought to Vesia. And all of the Osterick and Ospero children, Jutara finally had three of her own, all look alike. All are blonde and beautiful just like their mothers.”

*****END*****