

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Hothouse **ORCHID**

Vashti Valant

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Hothouse Orchid

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HOTHOUSE ORCHID

Vashti Valant

Chapter One

"Botany isn't really my specialty," Vance said.

"What? With a name like Gardener?" mocked the fat little man representing Hothouse Inc. It was obvious the company rep had already pegged Vance as some sort of lowlife tough. Vance's black battle-bitten leatherine flex-weave armor, worn skin-tight over a brawny chest, along with the prominently displayed guns on his hips, thigh and back, did contrast with the ostentatious blandness of the facility, which was part of Hothouse Inc.'s corporate headquarters' complex. The company rep led Vance through a grid of chrome corridors. These access ways led to a multitude of offices and laboratories, according to the neat labels on the walls, but they were sealed and concealed each and every one behind impenetrable security doors. The monotony of the endless straight passages, right angles and elevators had an almost narcotic quality.

"Just a coincidence," Vance said in response to the jeer at his name. "I have experience with genetic engineering but mostly in the field of human pathology. Since your company deals in hothouse flowers, not people—"

Vance broke off, not because the fat company rep ignored him but because they had entered a secured room where a girl lay strapped and splayed out naked on an examination table. Her skin was the shade of palest lilac, and her purple hair was streaked with marigold. A fragrance wafted from her of mingled tropical flowers and feminine enticement.

The table was one of those with an adjustable angle for the headboard and stirrups for the legs. The headboard on this one had been cranked to a slope of about thirty degrees and it faced the door, so the girl could clearly see the strangers enter, just as they had a fine view of her ample, purple-tipped breasts. There was no doubt that she was forcefully bound, not merely reclining there at her leisure. Metal clamps pinched her wrists to the edges of the table on either side of her head, such that her arms bent at the elbows flat against the black leather padding. Metal clasps around her ankles secured her delicate bare feet in the stirrups to pry her legs wide open.

If they had a fine view of her breasts, they had a magnificent view of her cunt. Her buttocks balanced on the edge of the table. Toe to hip, her legs were long and shapely, but loveliest of all was the smooth, taut skin of her inner thighs. As for her cunt, it was unbelievable. A woman's labia was often compared to the petals of a flower, but this gorgeous creature had actual flower petals, velvety purple, around the flushed lips of her pussy, where an ordinary woman would have had pubic hair.

Vance frankly stared at her intimate assets, fascinated.

When the girl saw the men, and how Vance focused on her exposed sex, she strained against the cuffs on her wrists and ankles in a futile effort to withdraw or cover

herself. The helpless movement only caused delicious ripples along her body. Humiliated, she twisted her head away from the men. A pinkish-purple blush stained her lilac cheeks. The blush matched the deeper tint of her spread labia and thus only further emphasized her sexuality.

"Your bio says that you were born on Earth," the company rep said disapprovingly to Vance. "Is the nature of the product going to be a problem for you?"

Vance Gardner *had* been born on Earth, but for the past fifteen years, he had lived on some of the roughest planets of the Edge. After the death of his wife and baby and the failure of their colony, Little Bentley, he had forged a living as a smuggler, a mercenary, a doctor, an exo-veternarian, a hunter, a gladiator and even as a technical assistant to a chef cooking with genetically engineered food. He had never started a fight, though he had been in many, and the men who *had* started them no longer breathed. Without his family, he had no particular reason to go on living. He was just too damn stubborn to die. So he took interesting and dangerous jobs, kept his body fit and hard, and his mind even harder.

His job description this time read "Technical Consultant". A grossly rich man, an Avant, in fact, had hired Vance to examine what had been described only as a special-order genetically engineered hothouse orchid. The Avants lived a lifestyle all their own, so it hadn't fazed Vance a bit to hear that this flower cost Fb 20,000,000, which equaled the entire sum of money pooled by the original two hundred fifty colonists of Little Bentley to found their community.

Vance had to admit that the scenario and the price made a little more sense now that he saw the "orchid" in question. Not a flower, but a sex toy. A very expensive, high-end sex toy, but no different in essence from the sex kittens and love bunnies churned out by Cathouses and Bunnyhutches. Those places provided genetically engineered *demifems*, creatures with the bodies of human women but truncated brains that lacked the neocortex, and thus the capacity for rational thought. The Houses said the demifems were about as smart as the cats or rabbits with whose genes they were spliced to give them their cute, animalistic features—ears, tails, a hint of fur—but Vance had found them to be duller even than the typical household pet. A cat, a real cat, could be quite clever and possessed a range of interests. The brains engineered for the demifems devoted most of their grey matter to sexual appetite, to the exclusion of all other drives. Some of them couldn't even feed themselves. They would starve if they wandered away from their keepers.

There had been a time when pride or ethics would have repulsed Vance from coming close to a sex kitten. But loneliness and need and danger piled up on a man, and he had overcome that squeamishness long ago. Yes, he had been to Cathouses. He'd even toyed with the idea of buying his own sex kitten. He'd treat his pet with kindness, and she would purr for him when he needed the physical relief of her lush, overfeminine body.

In the end, he never did it. Maybe the memory of Margaret was still too strong. Sex with Margaret had been a meeting of minds and hearts as well as bodies. A time to

share private jokes and secret fantasies as much as orgasms. The mindless mewling of a sex kitten could not compare, and there were many times that Vance had walked away from a Cathouse feeling relief in his pants, yet lonelier than ever.

If a cat-human hybrid possessed intelligence no greater than a cat, what would a plant-human hybrid be—a mental vegetable? Vance studied the purple-skinned girl. He had taken her blushes and squirming for humiliation, but perhaps that had been too generous. Humiliation was a sophisticated emotion. It could represent not only shame but a mixture of fear, pride, anger, arousal and even pleasure. To feel humiliated by the scrutiny of men, a woman had to have a sense of her own dignity, something a sex kitten, for instance, could not experience.

A blush, on the other hand, could represent no more than an autonomic response to the presence of strangers. It could be as unconscious and socially meaningless as the curling up of a fern when stroked.

The company rep fiddled with the examination bed, causing several monitors to unfold out of the sides on robotic arms. “This equipment should provide all the medical information you need for your evaluation.”

“Yes, thank you, I know how to use it,” Vance said. He felt unaccountably irritable and wanted to shoo the man away so he could examine the plant-girl in privacy. “My employer has left me instructions, including that I am to perform my evaluations without interference.”

“Indeed,” said the company rep. He sniffed. On his way out, he took childish delight in having the last word before he shut the security door behind him. “Pray, do not forget that in the meantime, the product is still owned by Hothouse Inc., not Mr. Royant-Bor. If you damage the goods and Mr. Royant-Bor refuses to go through with the sale, *you*, Mr. Gardener, will have to make up the costs.”

It was obvious what he thought of the likelihood that Vance’s pocketbook could cover Fb 20,000,000. Unfortunately, the man was right. Vance’s account was down to Fb 79.02 exactly. Vance never accumulated debts, but he sometimes dined on what he was paid for that same day’s labor. He needed the commission from this job.

After the Hothouse rep left the room, Vance triggered the implant behind his left eye. A small wire emerged and projected a screen directly into his retina. His employer, Mr. Royant-Bor, had provided him with a serial set of instructions, to be opened in order at the appropriate intervals. The first set of orders contained no surprises. It requested a genetic and physical examination of the product and provided the appropriate forms to fill out.

Vance walked around the examination table, viewing the girl from all sides. Truly, her design showcased exquisite craftsmanship. The scent of her alone aroused him. Her eyes followed him as he moved. Those eyes brimmed with apprehension, but he reminded himself that fear was another primitive emotion. It didn’t mean anything. If only she didn’t look so human, so vulnerable. She had huge eyes, gold-speckled green, with thick black lashes. Those pixie eyes, her baby-smooth skin, heart-shaped face and

pouted lips made her look very young, despite the lush maturity of her curves. He thought she must be only the biological equivalent of sixteen or seventeen, until he consulted one of the monitors the rep had extended for him and saw that she was actually twenty-four.

Twenty-four? Actual years? Vance puzzled over that. Most demifems reached the biological equivalent of eighteen years maturity in a space of two years. The Cathouses didn't want to waste a lot of time rearing them, and demifems hadn't the capacity for language or advanced social interaction, so they didn't need the long childhood of real humans. They were put to sleep once they reached thirty and their beauty started to flag.

The flower girl, in contrast, had been given a normal human life span.

Odd. Vance stroked her cheek. She flinched. Her eyes flashed with something that looked like anger before she averted her gaze. Curious, he traced the elegant curve of her neck down her bosom to the tip of her breast. As with her clit, petals that were part of her flesh framed her nipple, forming an orchid-patterned areola. It enthralled him. He stroked each petal in turn, marveling at the texture, which felt like velvet fuzzed flesh, incredibly erotic. When he pinched the nipple, a tiny, golden drop of dew appeared. Vance rubbed the secretion onto his fingertip and tasted it. *Sweet. So sweet.* Not milk. Something else, something exotic, something unique. He wondered what it would be like to lick her juices directly off her nipples. Would suckling her breasts be like tasting honeysuckle?

His pants felt tight. He had hardened just thinking about it.

Another blush climbed her cheeks. Her hands clenched and unclenched at the sides of the table where they were cuffed. She shifted under his hand. He couldn't help himself. He covered both her breasts with his hands and worked her nipples with his thumbs. Her breasts heaved and a strange, half-choked whimper parted her lips. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly, but a tear escaped and sparkled on her cheek.

Even her tears were exquisite, but the sight made Vance pause and remove his hands. A sex kitten would not have teared up when aroused. He was certain he had not hurt her. Why would she cry? Unless that was also part of her programming, because it made her look so helpless and beautiful to see a few tears glistening on her cheeks even as her nipples hardened with undeniable arousal and her lips parted to moan in pleasure. A human woman, bound and brought to ecstasy against her will, would demonstrate just such a mix of shame and gratification as she lost control of her inhibitions and succumbed to a masterful lover.

Had he misjudged her? Was she more than a mental vegetable or sex bunny?

"Do you have a name?" Vance asked her gently.

She jerked her gaze to his face when he addressed her. But she only stared.

"Can you speak at all?" he prodded. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Her lower lip trembled. She caught it in her teeth and gnawed it nervously. But otherwise her wild-eyed stare did not change.

"I did not think so." Vance sighed. He consulted the monitor instead, where he found an ID number, #4188-902-3466, and a nickname. It was another name for orchid.

Cattleya.

* * * * *

Cattleya struggled to control her breathing. She would not burst into tears before this stranger, she would *not*. Her body burned with shame, and with something else too, something she couldn't, didn't dare, identify. Even now, after he had removed his hands from her breasts, she could feel them quiver with the memory of his strokes and pinches.

Nothing like this had ever happened to her before. She had been told, by the woman who had escorted her to the examination room in this installation, that it would be a routine doctor's visit. Instead of kindly old Dr. Rachel, however, strangers—male strangers—had entered the room and trussed her to the table. At that point, she had been merely indignant.

I am not a child, she had wanted to inform them. Even if I must undergo some painful procedure, I have been properly trained in the meditation techniques to endure the pain without flinching.

However, the Seminary rules explicitly stated that a young lady must *never* address a stranger, *most especially not a strange man*. "The mark of a *true* lady," Madame Bhothswara often said primly, "is that she would rather drown than speak to a man to whom she had not been introduced, even to appeal to him for help." Cattleya privately considered this a bit extreme, and secretly had vowed that she would rather appeal than drown. Yet, in the presence of the strange men, she found that her training overpowered her rebellious fantasies, and she remained tongue-tied.

She remained silent even when the men did something worse to her than drown her. After locking her down to the table, they had removed the plastic hospital dress she had been wearing, which had been indecent enough in itself. That left her stark naked. Those men had exited the room before she could panic. But within half an hour, the two others had entered. The fat man...and *him*.

Her legs had been spread right in front of them. *That part*, the part even other girls should not see, the part she should never touch—even if, when her *vivavestita* touched it in a certain way, it had felt strangely delightful—the part that one day, she had been told, would belong to her Owner, *that part* had been pried open and exposed. The girls giggled about names for it. Forbidden names for a forbidden swath of anatomy. *Cunt*. *Pussy*. *Slot*. *Slit*. *Cleft*. *Lovebud*. *Clit*. The fat man hadn't glanced at her, which helped, but the other man, the rugged, handsome man who looked dangerous, bloodthirsty, mercenary, murderous, uncouth, uncivilized, overpowering and altogether alluring, he had stared right at her. Right at her cunt, as if it belonged to him, not to her.

For a wild moment her heart had thudded in her breast and she wondered if he *was* her Owner, the mysterious Mr. Royant-Bor, who had commissioned her existence

before she was even a fertilized egg. Although no one ever told the girls anything explicitly, the girls in the Seminary had ways of finding out whether they had been commissioned, and if so, by whom, or whether they would be sent to Auction. Cattleya had always felt special, fortunate, to have been one of the commissioned ones. Other girls envied her. She had often fantasized about what Mr. Royant-Bor would look like, whether he would be kind or sexy or fall in love with her. Of course he would, she told herself. He must already love her, or else why would he have paid so much money for her genes to be spliced just so, for her to be reared and schooled and trained to please him? He wanted the perfect wife, and she had vowed over and over growing up to study her best to be all that he expected.

The handsome, dangerous man had a chest bulging with muscles, a hard set to his jaw and a weary, disillusioned light in his eyes, as Cattleya imagined a powerful man such as an Avant might. Could this be the man who had been waiting for her to bring joy to his cutthroat world of power plays and high finance? The way he possessed her at once with his eyes, it felt so right. She felt he Owned her just by the way he razed her breasts and cunt with his forceful stare. And though she had wanted to hide from him, a part of her secretly rejoiced that she could not, that she had no choice but to let him view her with such obvious appreciation. She felt ashamed but also adored. It had seemed so right. She belonged to him and he was here to claim her.

Her fantasies had evaporated when the conversation between the two men made it clear that "Mr. Gardener" was nothing but a lowly employee of her true Owner, Mr. Royant-Bor. Not only did disappointment rush through her, but also her shame returned stronger than before, for it meant that she flaunted her nakedness to a man other than her destined husband. When the indifferent fat man left, dread and anticipation warred in her. What might happen once the dangerous man, the brutish Mr. Gardener, had her alone, tied down, naked, at his mercy?

He had touched her breasts. A part of her had wanted to die. Now she knew what Madame Bhothswara meant. Better to drown than suffer the degradation of foreign fingers exploring as they willed one's most intimate parts. And yet, now that he had stopped, her breasts throbbed with the ache to be stroked again.

"My name is Vance," the man told her. He did not glance at her. His focus had turned to the medical monitors attached to the bed. He spoke in the slow, reassuring manner one used with crying children and puppies. "Vance Gardener. I know you can't understand me, but I'm going to tell you what I'm doing as I do it. Right now, I am taking readings to gauge the health of your lungs, heart, blood flow and bones."

Odious man, Cattleya thought. Why did he assume she *could not* talk just because she *would not*? Did he think she was a complete idiot? Well, it didn't matter what he thought of her. She would behave as a lady, no matter how he violated her.

"You have a few of the deficiencies common in genetically engineered DNAs," Vance Gardener said. "But I see that you take regular supplements to counter them. And you broke your fibula two years ago. How did that happen, I wonder?"

Poppy had used an illegal cyber-enhanced hold and tossed Cattleya two meters over her head, that was how. Cattleya could still remember the sickening *thwack* as she'd come down wrong on the dojo floor. Cattleya had lost her second place medal and come in third in the Seminary's annual Martial Arts Festival Competition because of that throw. However, she had no intention of discussing her personal life with this *servant*. She would save her reminiscences for her dinner discussions with her doting husband.

To Cattleya's horror, Vance Gardener left the monitor and walked around to the front of the examination table, where he stood between her legs. Her cleft dampened and tingled in response to his presence. She prayed he did not notice. His large, warm hands touched her flesh again, on her calf. *He's just looking at the leg you broke two years ago. He's some sort of doctor, here to make sure you are in good health for your marriage.*

He massaged her calf. It felt nice. Not as threatening as his manipulations of her nipples, the feel of his hands on her still shot a tingle all the way up her leg into her clit. To her mortification, she made a slight heft with her hips that attracted his attention. A sly smile tugged at the edges of his lips. His hands slid farther up her leg, to her thigh. He continued to massage the muscles here, but as his fingers danced along her inner thigh, she tensed rather than relaxed. Her breath came faster.

That was the problem. He didn't act like any of the doctors she had ever had. He didn't treat her as a patient, or even as an object of platonic study. He played with her as though she were a toy. Her reactions to his touch interested him and provoked him to do more.

"Do you like being petted, Kitty-Catt?" he asked in a low, sensuous murmur.

Heat flooded Cattleya's face. She did like it, but she hated that she liked it, hated him knowing she liked it.

On the other leg, he started down at her calf and repeated the same treatment, the same slow climb up her thigh toward her spread pussy. She drenched herself down there with some unknown and shameful secretion, and he was so observant, she was sure he must see it. She strained to close her thighs although she knew she could not. The metal clasps bit cruelly into her ankles. The muscles in her thighs bunched.

"So tense," he said. "I know what you want."

How could he know, when she did not know herself? She wanted to die of embarrassment. She wanted him to stop. She wanted him to never stop.

His thumb pressed the tender flesh at the edge of her cleft.

"Your genetic architecture is not as altered as I would have expected," he continued. She could hardly concentrate on his words. His low, sexy voice rumbled over her, as intimate as his thumb stroking the outer folds of her slit. "You do have orchid DNA, but it appears to be operative at the dermal and mesodermal level. Your lactation system is altered from the mammalian norm, but not extraordinarily so. You can't have children without intervention, of course. And as to be expected, your secondary sexual organs, breasts and vulva, fall into the high range of sensitivity to

arousal. You have many nerve endings right here, my Kitty-Catt—" He did something with several fingers at once, squeezing then spreading then pitter-pattering her labia, that caused Cattleya a flood of pleasure. Her hips bucked in his hands. She tasted blood on her lip because she bit down on it to keep from crying out.

"I'm curious to see what your vagina feels like," he said. "Velvety, like your labia, or fleshy, like a human woman?"

No. Please no!

A finger toggled at her opening. Cattleya shuddered. She had thought she could not feel any more spread open than she had been, but when his finger slipped inside her, followed by another that expanded her shaft, he claimed a whole new level of her private self, deeper still, as his own to plunder. How strange his fingers felt, pressing against muscles she had never known existed before. Again, it seemed he knew more about her body than she, and her body recognized his mastery even as she rebelled against the invasion.

He pumped his fingers in and out of her in languorous, possessive strokes. Inside, it felt amazing, but at the rim of the opening, pain crackled through her each time he reentered. Cattleya did not know she had begun to weep quietly until he commented on it.

"Little flower, does it hurt so much? They have given you a tight cherry, and a tough one. I can fit no more than two fingers in, and even that hurts you, doesn't it? Someone wanted to make certain that your virginity is obvious. Your designers have guaranteed that your first time will be painful, no matter how cautious your lover." The idea affronted him from the sound of it. "It seems cruel and unnecessary in this day and age, when there are other ways to tell. You've also been marked with a biochemical telltale, which will be triggered only by a man's organ. That should have been sufficient for them."

He withdrew his fingers. Cattleya felt relieved and yet empty in a place she had never realized could feel full.

"I've frightened you," he said with regret. He walked around the table to stand beside her face. He wiped off his hands, which, she saw with considerable chagrin, were slick with her juices. Tenderly, he brushed the tears from her cheeks. "I'm sorry. You don't understand any of this, do you? It's not your fault they made you what you are. To you, this cold room, this bed and the clasps, must be overwhelming. And I fear that this examination is just the first of many to come."

Cattleya blinked at him in horror. There would be more sessions? Would he probe her with his fingers again? A part of her exalted at the idea, which made the rest of her recoil in shame and self-loathing.

"I must complete the genetic analysis," he said. "I will see you tomorrow for the second exam."

Chapter Two

Cattleya longed to return to the dormitory to share with the other girls what had been done to her. Not that she would have told them everything. How could she have brought herself to divulge where the strange man had touched her—or how she had responded? No, she could not have admitted that even to her three closest friends, Aster, Petunia and Dahlia.

But she would have told them about Vance Gardener, described him and solicited their opinion on him. The more Cattleya reflected on it, the more she felt, indignantly, that the man was nothing more than a thug. He could not possibly be a real doctor. She should have seen it from the first, from the cut of his clothes. A man of leisure did not wear visibly battle-scuffed, laser resistant shell-wear and black leatherine flex-weave. A pugilist or a criminal dressed that way. A man with a reason to expect an attack, and the cockiness to fight back, dressed that way. What did he know about the finer things in life? Art, music, philosophy? No wonder he had the audacity to manhandle a lady!

She never had the chance to discuss him with her friends. Instead of allowing her to return to the Seminary, the guards who came for Cattleya escorted her to a small cell with a single bed and a sink and a necessary in the corner. She found a plasticloth tunic folded on the bed. Although it was sleeveless, nearly translucent and only reached to her thighs, she felt more civilized as soon as she put it on. She still felt half naked without her usual floor-length skirts and petticoats, or a corset to support her breasts.

Cattleya slept uneasily that night, tormented by tantalizing dreams of Vance's hands between her legs. The next morning, the guards returned her to the same examination room. They stripped her and bound her to the chair in the same humiliating position as before. Instead of being easier the second time, it was harder to bear. Cattleya knew exactly how helpless she would be, should her examiner decide to toy with her again. What could she do to prevent him from playing with her nipples or prying open her slit with his rough, warm hands? Nothing. The thought frightened and excited her. Useless as it was, she strained against the metal cuffs. It only hurt her wrists and ankles, which were still sore from yesterday. Cool air from the vent whispered against her spread cleft, reminding her of his feathery finger strokes from the day before. She groaned. He had not even arrived in the room yet, and already her cunt was wet for him.

When he did finally enter, she glanced up at him apprehensively, and what she saw made her shrink back in her manacles. He was angry. Extremely angry. His sheer size and strength overwhelmed her even more than it had yesterday. The muscles in his neck and biceps knotted and jumped with tension. He pressed his lips into a thin,

bloodless line. He hit Cattleya with one hard stare then avoided looking at her as he adjusted machines at the back of her chair, out of her sight.

Cattleya trembled. She lay chained spread-eagle and naked at the total mercy of this enigmatic man. Yesterday, he had been invasive, yet gentle. What if today he chose to use her savagely?

What had her future husband been thinking in hiring such a barbarian to examine her? It could only be a test of her devotion to her true Owner. Vance had as much as admitted that he came close to destroying her virginity. Tears sprang to her eyes at the terrible consequences of that. It had been drilled into her that she must keep herself pure, in body and in mind, for her future Owner. Only then might he deem her worthy to be his wife in addition to his possession. She must resist Vance's attempts to ruin her.

From behind her, a helmet lowered onto her head. The helmet had prongs that launched pricks into her scalp and gripped it, and also an eye shield that blocked out all light. Cast into blackness, Cattleya's pulse rate rose even higher. She keenly felt her nakedness and the fact that he could still see every part of her, while she could not even see where he stood any longer.

The rustle and clink of his clothing told her that he had changed position. She could not tell quite where he had gone until his hands closed around her right breast. Cattleya jumped. The pads of his fingers were distinctly masculine, so much more rugged than a woman's. The slight abrasion of his calloused skin against her soft mound brought the whole breast alive.

At some level, she had grown to trust in the gentleness of his touch. What he did next shattered that illusion.

Something hard, cold and metallic clipped onto her nipple. Cattleya cried out at the sharp pain. He did not remove it, only worked the clamp more firmly into place. The initial shock evolved into a heightened awareness of her nipple as never before.

This time when his hands cupped and lifted her other breast, Cattleya stiffened her whole body in anticipation of the pain to come. Another clip snapped down on her nipple. She whimpered. Almost, she parted her lips to plead with him to stop. *Please, please don't hurt me.* Pride rescued her from the faux pas. She must not address him, no matter what he did to her.

Her nipples were jerked up by the two metal attachments. He shoved her breasts together and snapped something, a metal bar it seemed, between the two metal clips. This forced her breasts to remain tightly pressed together, bridged by the nipples. He lifted the metal bar slightly, drawing her nipples up with it. He kept up the pressure just until the stretching became unbearable and Cattleya whimpered again. Then he released her.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

She bit her lip. It didn't hurt exactly, or not past bearing. But it made her feel so dependent. Her whole attention fixated on the feeling in her nipples.

Until she felt his hands brush the insides of her thighs.

No. No, please, not there.

He parted her labia. A clasp snicked onto her clit. Surprisingly, the initial bite did not hurt as much as the clamps on her nipples. The design of this device differed. But the ongoing stimulation on her entrapped nub was stronger. She could focus on nothing beyond the feel of the metal jaws nipping her enflamed clit.

"This will hurt," he said.

An electric shock jolted through her nipples and clit. Cattleya sobbed in sheer terror. Again, the pain was not beyond enduring, it even left a strangely arousing after-tingle in her ever more sensitive breasts and cunt, but her sense of powerlessness overwhelmed her. Yesterday, he had tormented her with soft caresses and pleasure. Today, he intended to out-and-out torture her.

"The test requires the shock to be administered as punishment," he said coldly. "That is not my decision, it is a standard Skinnerian test. Picture puzzles will appear in your visor. Two pictorial answers to the puzzle will follow. You are to answer the question by squeezing your right hand for the right option or your left hand for the left option. Wrong answers will be punished by the shock you just experienced. If you are sentient enough to understand these instructions, you may avoid any shocks altogether. If not, well, parrots and rats can learn to take these tests through trial and error. So will you.

"I am beginning the test...now."

A jumble of colors flashed before her. While grateful for the return of visual input, Cattleya could not make heads or tails of the random image, nor the split image that followed. She did not squeeze either hand. After a moment, a buzzer sounded in her ear, along with an X across the screen.

Electricity crackled through her tits and cunt. Cattleya cried out, this time as much in fury as in pain. He had no right to put her through this demeaning test as if she were a lab rat.

"No answer will be treated as a wrong answer," Vance said flatly.

She hated him.

Another image flashed before her. This time, not taken as much off guard as in the first round, Cattleya recognized it as a simple matching puzzle. A baby could have answered it, in fact. The test truly *was* designed for rats and parrots.

I won't do it, she raged silently. She had scored highest in her class in three academic and two artistic fields. Let him consult those tests if he wanted to judge her intelligence. She squeezed both hands together. Let the stupid machine make what it would of that.

The shock hit her again. This time she anticipated it and grated her teeth.

More infantile puzzle pictures passed in a slideshow before her, but Cattleya refused to unclench her hands. The bolts of pain fell into a regular pattern. She could deal with this. The meditation techniques she had learned provided her with the ability

to tune out all other input besides her own ingoing and outgoing breath. The pain retreated into background noise.

Darkness accompanied the cessation of pain. The visor went blank. The shocks stopped. Cattleya did not dare assume, however, that the test had ended.

"You must take me for a fool, Cattleya," Vance said in a low, dangerous voice.

His statement, his obvious anger, shattered her hard-won calm. It was one thing to use the meditation to ignore physical discomfort, but Cattleya had never been able to employ the same technique against social distractions. As soon as she forgot to concentrate on her breathing, the fire in her breasts and pussy blazed into her consciousness. After that, every attempt she made to regain her serenity failed her.

"I went over the detailed analysis of your DNA last night," he continued. "As well as your brain scan. Your brain is fully intact, complete with a prefrontal cortex and extremely active cingulate gyrus. Furthermore, your speech centers, including your Broca and Wernicke's areas, are intact and active. In other words, you can damn well understand every word I say. You can speak."

Vance spat out this accusation as if she had committed a crime.

"I don't know what game you're playing," he said. "Why are you deliberately trying to fail this simple IQ test? Why pretend to be a dumb bunny? Who are you trying to fool? Me, or Hothouse Inc.?"

Cattleya was at a loss. What would Madame Bhonthswara advise in this situation? Surely Cattleya must answer him, to assure him that she had had no intention of defrauding anyone. Any assumptions he had made about her were purely his own.

But what if this was part of the test? The real test?

If only she knew where her duty lay, she would perform it without complaint, no matter how arduous. She was so confused.

"I could turn up the power on the electric clamps," he said. "If you think those love taps before hurt, you have no idea."

Cattleya shivered. She doubted she could regain her composure through meditation if the pain truly did grow too intense. At the same time, his threat convinced her that she was right to think this was all part of the real test. Though it frightened her, she maintained her silence.

"But I think I know you better than that," he said softly.

He lifted the bridge between her nipple clamps. Her breasts strained and her back arched to accommodate the motion. He let go of the bar and let them bounce back into place. Her whole bosom heated and tingled.

Next, he toggled the clit clamp. Jolts as strong as the electric shock, but of pure pleasure, shot through her body down to her toes. He unfastened the clamp. Air swept over the aching clit.

"Your bud is deep magenta," he said. "It must be quite sensitive by now."

His thumb lowered to press her clit.

Sensitive did not begin to describe it.

Cattleya's buttocks jumped off the edge of the examination table. With his other hand, Vance held her thighs down. Meanwhile, his thumb commenced languid circles against her clit. She could not see him. The visor kept her blindfolded. Being blindfolded and tied down while he played her at his leisure only heightened her illicit delectation in his touch.

Then he stopped.

"If you want me to continue, you're going to have to say please," he said.

A deep, animal moan of longing wrenched free from her throat.

He touched her clit again. Circling. Teasing. Building up a tension in her that demanded release.

Then he stopped.

"You must say the word 'please' out loud. You must beg me to continue. Say my name. Say, 'Please, Vance'. Or I will stop."

She whimpered in frustration.

Each time his thumb returned to her clit, it brought her a little bit closer. His circles jiggled the clit faster now. Yes. Oh yes. Like that. Oh. Oh!

"Say it, Cattleya. Say the magic word."

Pleasure piled upon pleasure. She squirmed under his thumb. She was close. So close. She didn't know to what, but something wonderful...

Then he stopped.

"Please!" she blurted out loud. "Please, Vance! Please don't stop!"

He bayed in triumph.

She had managed to clench her thighs closer together despite her manacles. Vance pressed them open to their fullest again. He kept his hands there now, yet something flicked across her clit.

His tongue.

Her clit rolled back and forth in the masterful swirls of his tongue. Cattleya thrashed in mindless ecstasy. The crescendo she had begged from him, he delivered. Bliss broke in cascades from her cunt to the rest of her body. Every muscle tightened and relaxed.

Finally, she crumpled back in her cuffs against the examination table, sheathed in sweat and her own juices, utterly limp.

She heard him chuckle.

"You are beautiful when you come, Cattleya. Your voice begging my name to make you come is more beautiful yet."

He removed the visor and headpiece from her scalp. Harsh light stabbed her eyes, and she took this excuse to turn her head away from him as far as the restraints allowed. With the return of her normal vision, the real world returned as well. No

longer could she hide in an alternate reality of darkness fabricated from sheer passion. She must face her responsibilities, and her failures.

What have I done? she wondered. *Did I fail my Owner's test?*

Surely she had. She wept in shame-filled despair.

* * * * *

The girl was crying again.

Vance brushed the tears from her cheeks. He grasped her chin and forced her to look up at him with her huge, tear-filled green eyes.

"I know that brought you pleasure, not pain. What are you afraid of, Cattleya?"

"Sir," she asked in a small voice. "Am I still a virgin? Or have I betrayed my husband at your hands?"

His grip tightened around her chin. "Your husband? What new game is this?"

She wrenched her head free of him with a flash of anger.

"I am not playing any games!" she said hotly. "You have played games with me, sir! You have forced me to speak to you, a total stranger, when I should not have. You have used my body as your toy. You have taken advantage of my helplessness to torment me with pain or pleasure as you see fit. But now." More tears welled up. "I well know that it is I who shall have to pay the price for what you have done to me."

After her long silence, Cattleya's elegant articulation of her situation struck Vance as all the more poignant. But he still didn't understand. Yes, he had used her as a toy, because she was a toy. Was it possible she did not know her own nature, or the purpose for which she had been created?

Unless... What if she were not a demifem at all? Why had she been forbidden to speak to him? Could it be that she was a human woman who had been captured, cosmetically disguised as an orchid-hybrid, and provided with fake genetic records to reinforce the illusion? A princess of Earth had once been captured by pirates from the Anarchion and been forced to disguise herself as a sex kitten in order to escape. Perhaps his employer had suspected something like this, and that explained why Mr. Royant-Bor had hired Vance.

If so, Vance promised himself, he would not leave Cattleya here at the mercy of her captors. He would inform Mr. Royant-Bor of the fraud, collect his fee and rescue this poor woman from Hothouse Inc.'s high-class brothel.

Once Vance made a decision, he did not second-guess himself. He leaned over Cattleya and released the metal nipple clamps from her breasts. His hard-on, which had grown watching her come but decreased when she began to cry, returned at the sight of her petal-soft breasts and flushed nipples. Her rich, loamy scent tantalized him. Only the new awareness that she might be a human woman, not just a genetically crafted slave girl, restrained him from rubbing his hands over the stiff buds.

He circumnavigated the examination table to unfasten the metal clasps around her wrists and ankles. He found the skimpy plastic smock they must have brought her in and handed it to her. She put it on without a word and quickly drew in her arms and legs to sit demurely at the edge of the examination table.

"Thank you," she said, subdued.

"Is Cattleya your real name?" he asked. He expected not. Cattleya referred to a kind of orchid, and if she had been born of human parents rather than out of a lab, she must have a real name.

"Yes," she said, confounding him.

"Have you any other?"

"My ID number. 4188-902-3466."

"Then you admit you were created in a lab."

"I never denied it." She frowned at him in annoyance. "You keep accusing me of playing tricks, but I don't know what you're talking about. You're the one who has all sorts of tests within tests. I know very well that so-called intelligence test you pretended to give me was just a charade." She hung her head. Her dark purple hair fell to shield her face. "And I know that I must have failed the true test. What will you tell Mr. Royant-Bor about me? Will you tell him that I proved unworthy to be his wife because I succumbed to you?"

Vance didn't know what to say. He could not imagine an Avant as powerful as Mr. Royant-Bor taking a demifem to wife. On the other hand, nothing about this assignment made any damn sense. Why had his employer not warned him what kind of "product" he would be inspecting? How could this girl admit she had been created in a lab yet expect to be honored and respected, even married, as if she were a human woman?

"You are still a virgin, Cattleya," Vance said.

"But—is that possible? You put your hands on my...and then your mouth...and it felt so... I felt so..." A purplish pink blush climbed her cheeks.

Vance smiled. "You had an orgasm. Haven't you ever had one before?"

She shook her head, still humiliated.

"Have you never put your own hands down there to pleasure yourself?"

Her flush deepened.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, Cattleya. It's what you were created for, to experience pleasure at the hands of a man. Your kind even more so than a normal human female."

"What do you mean by that?"

He opened the smock to reveal her breasts. She squirmed but did not stop him. He gathered them both into one hand while he traced the outline of the petals that formed her areola. Her nipples hardened.

"I mean this. Your breasts, your body, are a man's fantasy. Your body is designed to be petted and tasted and delved by a hard cock. You were made for sex."

She quivered. "But I am more than that. I have a mind of my own."

"I don't know why," he said frankly. "You don't need one."

Furiously, she shoved away his hands and closed her smock. "You are odious! How dare you tell me what I am and what I need? How could a man like you, an unevolved ape, understand the purpose for which I was designed? For your information, Mr. Gardener, I was not made for sex. I certainly wasn't made for you. I was commissioned by my Owner to be the woman of his dreams, his life companion, his true love! I was made for love, Mr. Gardener, not sex! Maybe a man like you can't understand the difference, but fortunately my Owner and future husband is a better man than you!"

A vision of Margaret flashed painfully before his memory. He saw her with their dead child in her arms, weeping over the babe. After that, she had just given up. She had died within a few days. Vance felt the terrible void consume him all over again. Anger rushed in to fill the emptiness.

He pinned Cattleya's hands behind her back and tore open her smock.

"I have loved a woman. A real, human woman, who had a mother and a father and a sister and a family. She had a childhood full of dreams, and when we met and fell in love in school, we wove new dreams together. She bore my son. She laughed and argued with me, she supported me, she stood up to me when I was wrong and bullheaded. She was everything to me.

"Her breasts were not as full as yours." He twisted Cattleya's breast and made her cry out. "They were not as pert and round and perfect. They sagged a bit as she grew older. They were not petaled with exotic orchids." He released his hold and rolled the nipple between his fingers instead. "They were made to provide milk for our son, not nectar for a man's mouth."

He pinched Cattleya's nipple and as he had known it would, a drop of golden honeydew emerged. He lowered his head and sucked it into his mouth. She gasped. Damn, but she tasted sweet, as sweet as he'd imagined. He nipped the bud with his teeth and sucked again, harder, drawing more of her honey into his mouth. Then he left that breast dripping and moved to the other one. He swirled his tongue around her nipple until he tasted the sweetness of this breast as well.

Vance wanted to drink all of her. He wanted to drain her of her allure, to suckle her long enough that he would never feel the urge to taste her ever again. But the more he savored her nipples in his mouth, the more of her he wanted. He wanted to taste her clit again, lap up the wetness in her slit and then plunge his cock into her tight channel. He had to drag his mouth away from her, unsatiated. He shoved her back against the examination table.

She stared up at him, panting. Her breasts heaved. She was as hungry for him as he was for her and she could not hide it.

“Yes, I want you,” he told her. “I want to fuck you. Your Owner made sure that every man who sees you will want to fuck you. You are enticement embodied. You are beauty itself, but only skin deep, Cattleya. Only skin deep. And while your precious Owner was wasting 20,000,000 feebs to have you built to be a wet dream, my wife and son died from lack of the right life support equipment that we could have bought for a tenth of that price. Not so he could have a wife, but so he could have a toy. A fuck toy. That’s all you are, and all you’ll ever be.”

Imagine a man who plucked a flower, a fragile orchid, and ripped its petals to shreds, or who had a small, helpless creature at his feet and kicked it. Vance took one look at Cattleya’s ashen expression and realized that he was that man. He had hurt a helpless thing. That he had only spoken the cold truth, or that he had been insensate with the memory of an irreconcilable loss did not excuse it. His callous words had devastated the pretty slave girl, the truth in them perhaps most of all.

He had no way to take the words back.

Chapter Three

Madame Bhothswara pursed her lips. The matron in a long black gown escorted Vance down a decorative arcade of a place called Blodeuwedd Seminary. Madame Bhothswara pronounced the name "Bluh-DIE-weth". Vance wasn't certain if the Seminary had been named after the planet, or vice versa. This complex of buildings and gardens was to be found at some distance from the corporate headquarters of Hothouse Inc., where Vance Gardener had started his exams of Cattleya. A private train connected the two centers. The social distance between the two exceeded the physical distance. Whereas the corporate headquarters had striven to reduce its visitors to cogs in an impersonal, imposing machine, every nook and aerie of Blodeuwedd Seminary bespoke cozy intimacy. Yet Vance, with his weapons, his onyx armor, his hard masculine edges and forceful stride, was as much an intruder in this pastel, feminine sanctuary of solariums and esplanades as he had been in the chrome bureaucracy of the labs and offices.

"It's most irregular," said Madame Bhothswara. "It's not that we mind a third-party investigator. We are happy to accommodate the busy schedules of our clients. However, I should have been the first to be notified that Mr. Royant-Bor wished to claim his commission. The protocol is two months' notification, we prefer six. And I should have been told of your arrival! The examinations are supposed to take place here, on the Seminary grounds, not at the corporate headquarters. When I finally found out where they had taken Cattleya and had her returned here, much damage had already been done. There is a reason our logo is a hothouse. Our flowers cannot be exposed to the inclement weather of the outside world before they are fully bloomed."

"I apologize for any misunderstandings," Vance said. "I fear neither my employer nor the company representative who met me mentioned the existence of the Seminary. I still find it rather surprising. Is this an actual school, or is the term 'seminary' merely a polite fiction?"

Vance thought of the large breeding centers where sex kittens were reared in holding pens and metal cages. The breeding centers churned out a new generation of demifems in twenty-four months, girls who were sold off to Cathouses. The demifems received potty training and attended an obedience school that disciplined them to crave a man's touch and respond to simple spoken commands. That was all.

"Did your employer not explain the philosophy behind the Hothouse methodology, Mr. Gardener?" asked Madame Bhothswara.

"I fear not, Madame."

She sniffed. "Well. Our products are quite unique. We are very exclusive, Mr. Gardener. Not everyone can afford our prices."

"Of that I am well aware," he murmured.

"In return, we provide a superior product. Our flowers do not have truncated lives or sub-sapient brains. They are fully human in every sense, insofar as their minds are concerned. We weed out embryos with inferior intelligence or intractable personalities. However, only their beauty has been directly enhanced by genetic tampering. They are flowers come to life as women. Behold!"

She tapped a code into the wall and led him through a security door—ornate, fretted and recessed beneath a cupola—to an elevated terrace that crossed above a parterre. The scent of a garden in bloom perfumed the air. Cliques of girls, who appeared to range in age from fourteen to twenty-four, meandered along the pathways of the exquisitely landscaped courtyard below the terrace. They possessed brightly colored hair and pastel skin in a variety of flower hues. Their full-length dresses complimented their coloring with deeper or else pleasantly contrasting shades. Some held school computers and others toted musical instruments.

"Our lovely ladies," Madame Bhothswara said with obvious pride. "Each one is a work of art. I must caution you, if we should pass nearer to any of the ladies, not to address them. They are not permitted to speak with strangers, and absolutely not to men."

Ah, thought Vance.

"You see, our ladies are pure," she said. "They are pure in body, naturally. Each one will go to Auction, or to the Owner who commissioned her, a certified virgin. But much more importantly, they are pure in heart and mind. Before they graduate to the Seminary, they attend Blodeuwedd Academy, for the girls three to thirteen, and before that, they live in the Nursery. They are provided with a rigorous education in the arts, sciences and social graces. Every one of them can play a musical instrument, dance, cook, compute and compose poetry. At Blodeuwedd Seminary, they complete a formal college and graduate education in a field of specialization. If they have no commissioned Owner or he has no preference as to the direction of their studies, they pursue a topic of their own choice according to their favor and aptitude."

Vance recalled his cruel words to Cattleya, telling her that her mind was superfluous and she was nothing more than a fuck toy. It shamed him now. He wondered what field of specialization she had chosen.

"And yet," he said aloud to Madame Bhothswara, "isn't all this pretense that they are normal 'ladies' crueler to the girls in the end? For after everything—allowing them to grow up slowly, to study and to dream—they are still destined to just be whores. What good will their college educations and musical talents do for them, Madame, when they are lying flat on their backs with their legs spread?"

"Sir!" Madame Bhothswara reddened. "I must ask you to watch your language! I will not permit obscenities in my presence."

"Why avoid plain language, Madame? You are raising these girls to be whores. I see no point in evading the issue."

To her credit, Madame Bhothswara did not shrink from his harsh indictment. She stiffened her spine. "You mistake the issue, Mr. Gardener. They will grow to be courtesans and concubines, not whores."

"A matter of semantics."

"Not at all. It is a matter of class. If you peruse the course of history, you will find that Civilization's greatest art and literature has often been advanced in the boudoirs and salons of high-class courtesans. Often those ladies were the best educated of their sex in their respective societies as well as the most beautiful. That is why we take such care in cultivating our ladies' minds as well as their bodies. Let me speak to your level, Mr. Gardener, and be blunt. To ply their trade, whores need cunts; courtesans need graces."

"But those pretty petal cunts don't hurt," Vance said cynically.

"I cannot understand," Madame Bhothswara said with a tightening of her lips, "why Mr. Royant-Bor chose a man with a background such as yours to judge Cattleya."

"Neither can I," Vance said. This was the truth. It bothered him actually, because Mr. Royant-Bor did not seem like one to make any decision without shrewd deliberation.

"Cattleya has prepared to entertain you with a Hospitality ceremony. This is an important ceremony for a Blodeuwedd lady, something she must choreograph herself and practice for many months. Every one of our ladies must craft such a performance at the highest standards of feminine grace before she may graduate. Cattleya has won several awards for hers. I hope you will attempt to restrain your crude remarks and evaluate the demonstration of the skills involved."

"Certainly, Madame. I am eager to see the 'graces' of which you speak."

She flickered a frown over his attire. "Forgive me my impertinence, Mr. Gardener. Perhaps you would like to freshen up before you dine?"

He shrugged.

To "freshen up" involved an extended visit to a bathhouse and spa, where silent female servitors—not flower girls, but ordinary slaves—offered to scrub him with a variety of brushes, soaps and ointments. Although they were pretty and naked except for their collars, their bland bodies could not tempt Vance now that he had seen Cattleya. He wondered if she had spoiled him for all ordinary women.

He did not allow himself to be parted from his weapons, even in the bath. He had led too nervous a career for such carelessness. But the slaves managed to replace his black leatherine with Earth-style court attire, a flared brocade jacket, embroidered vest, silk blouse, matching trousers and boots. Vance rolled his eyes. He had not worn such foppish threads in many a year. He fastened his guns into place beneath the brocade jacket, damned if he would be disarmed as well as dressed like a popinjay.

Madame Bhothswara reappeared. Her mouth twitched with a hint of dismay when she saw his stubborn display of ordnance, but she had better sense than to comment. She ushered Vance through more elegant galleys until they reached a neo-classical

formal dining room. It stretched high over their heads to a ceiling vaulted and coffered in gold-gilt lacunaria. Marble tiles tessellated the floor, warmed at one end with a thick cream-colored area rug cast down before a grandiose fireplace. At the other end of the spacious room, one discovered a table set for two lit from directly above by a chandelier aglimmer with real candles. This left a considerable expanse in the center of the room for an elevated section of floor, one half step above the rest, that served no obvious purpose. Most perplexing of all, a swing hung from the ceiling over the center of the platform.

A second door, cleverly masked to blend in with the paneled wall, opened into the dining room. A woman entered the room. She floated on a cloud of yellow, gauzy material that formed the fullness of her skirt. The gown pinched in her waist and bared her shoulders beneath a ruff of yellow orchids. Lianas of yellow orchids also scooped and draped her wide skirts. He recognized the gown as a *vivavestita*, a dress bioengineered out of living material, in this case, orchids. Vance had not seen a *vivavestita* since he'd left Earth. The pale lemon hue complimented her lilac skin and dark purple hair, which flowed down her back in ringlets. It took Vance a moment to recognize in this vision of sophistication the same girl whose nude body he had examined, explored and insulted in the laboratory. He recognized her fragrance first. It intoxicated him as much as ever.

"Mr. Gardener, may I introduce you to Lady Cattleya," Madame Bhothswara said formally. "Lady Cattleya, this gentleman is Mr. Gardner, the special representative of Mr. Royant-Bor. His wishes are to command your fullest compliance, as if issued from the mouth of Mr. Royant-Bor himself."

"I am honored to meet you, Mr. Gardener." Cattleya swept into a gracious curtsy. She gave no indication that she had ever met him before, never mind that she had come, breathless and begging, in response to his probing. Her composure was absolute.

"Lady Cattleya." Vance bowed to her as if she were indeed a highborn lady at the court of the Empire of Earth.

Madame Bhothswara discreetly withdrew.

"My lady?" Vance held his hand out to Cattleya. Despite his keen sense of the absurdity of the whole charade, Vance followed the protocol drilled into him as a boy, at his father's house back on Earth, and assisted Cattleya into her chair.

"I thank you, sir." Her manners were impeccable. If not for her exotic countenance, she could indeed have passed for a Lady of the Empire by her mien alone. She asked him all the right questions about his dining preferences, in the correct order. She operated the bejeweled control panel on the table with aplomb. When the tabletop whirled, opened and sprouted serving platters bloated with victuals, she dished the first course of the meal onto his plate exactly to his specifications. She poured him the appropriate wine for his choice of meal. She served herself last.

Vance held up his goblet. "A toast?"

She inclined her head, lifting her own goblet. She awaited his choice of quotes with a frosty demeanor of challenge. He realized, with more amusement than offense, that she thought him too uncouth to have a command of the classics.

"Come, my friends. 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world," he said in a low, seductive purr.

*Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days.
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will.
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

"Tennyson," she said, a little surprised. "From his 1842 poem, 'Ulysses'. I was not aware that you had studied poetry, Mr. Gardener."

"As I was not aware of your own studies, Lady Cattleya," Vance said. He clinked his glass to hers. "To a fresh examination of life. It is not too late to seek a newer world, or a different relationship between us."

She hid her blush in a quick sip of her wine. Vance watched the color rise in her cheeks, and remembered her helpless blushes and arousal while she had been chained to the examination bed. His cock hardened. He sipped his own drink slowly, watching her.

"Madame Bhothswara told me about Blodeuwedd Seminary, but very little about you in particular. I understand you have recently completed your graduate degree. May I ask in what major?"

"Terraforming."

His brows rose. "Was that your choice, or the preference of your, ahem, sponsor, Mr. Royant-Bor?"

"My choice. Mr. Royant-Bor indicated that I might direct my own studies as I saw fit." She lifted her chin. "He has always been most considerate of my wishes."

"What inspired your choice, if I may ask? Terraforming is mainly of use to new colonies out on the Edge."

"Oh but I believe that is where the future lies." Her eyes shone. "Out there, where humans are landing upon wild, untamed worlds for the first time, seeking to fuse together the alien and the earthly into a viable symbiosis. You left out part of Tennyson's poem, Mr. Gardener.

*Push off, and sitting well in order smite.
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds.*

*To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths.
Of all the western stars, until I die.*

"How I would love to be one of the bold pioneers who sail beyond the baths of all the western stars, to found a new world!"

"A rather unlikely occupation for the wife of Mr. Royant-Bor," Vance said, more crushingly than he had intended. Her innocent enthusiasm had touched him, despite himself.

Her face fell. She stirred her food with her fork, disconsolately.

"Well, yes," she admitted, in a small voice. "Naturally, I never dared believe... What I mean is, Madame Bhothswara has warned us that we Blodeuwedd ladies should not expect to have careers in the usual sense. Our hope is to make ourselves as useful as possible to our Owners, as wives or at least as cherished friends. From that selfless service, our lives will derive their meaning."

Cherished friends, Vance thought cynically. Is that how Madame Bhothswara explained it?

But he had already thrown the ugly truth in Cattleya's face once. He had no wish to repeat the experience.

"Perhaps it is for the best," he said instead. "Terraforming a raw world is a dangerous occupation. I was once a pioneer myself. Our colony failed, in part because the terraforming did not take according to the expected timetable. We did not have the life-support resources to extend the project. Most of the colonists died before relief forces arrived."

Including Margaret and Lew.

A soft hand touched his across the table.

"I am so sorry," Cattleya said.

He meant to let the subject drop there. But Cattleya asked a technical question about the nature of the terraforming failure, an inquiry distant enough from his grief that he answered her. He found himself reliving his days in Little Bentley, experiences that he had never shared with any soul since the colony had failed. Whenever his words tripped on too painful a memory, Cattleya somehow drew him out again, on a side topic that enabled him to go on. Their conversation ranged from the technical details of terraforming, to the ethics of human exploration of worlds already inhabited by non-sentient alien life forms, to personal reminiscences of daily life in a struggling colony. He even mentioned his estrangement from his father. Cattleya kept the food flowing through the requisite courses even as she contributed insight, poetry, wit and compassionate listening to the conversation. Vance was startled, when he checked his personal timepiece, to discover that they had passed three and a half hours together over the seven-course meal.

He felt guilty that he had gluttoned himself on both the cuisine and the company.

"My lady," he said gravely. "I fear I have kept you over late."

"Not at all, Mr. Gardener," Cattleya replied. "It is now time for me to present myself to you for your evaluation."

In a rush, he remembered why he was here, who she was and, more to the point, what she was. Strange that he had forgotten.

"Present yourself?" he asked cautiously. Blood rushed to his groin. He had a clear picture of how he enjoyed seeing her presented.

"Yes, Mr. Gardener." She lowered her lashes to her cheeks. "I am to dance for you."

* * * * *

Cattleya rose from the sweetheart table. The swathes of her vivavestita swished and rustled around her as she moved. She pulled a pinkie-sized wand from the girdle of the dress, and handed this to Vance.

"Do you know what it is?" she asked.

"Yes." His smoky eyes burned her. He had that look again, the look that said no matter what she wore he would always remember her breasts thrust up and her cunt spread open before him. She blushed and avoided his gaze.

The wand was the key to her vivavestita, a kind of remote control. Cattleya had never handed it over to a man before. Few people knew how to use it, but after his smooth performance at dinner, Cattleya was no longer willing to wager on Vance's ignorance. He was a man of strange contradictions. By his own admission, he had spent much of his adult life living in the harshest environments as a pioneer or worse. Yet he had ornamented himself in High Empire court manners as naturally as he had donned court finery. What kind of mercenary thug, or even good-hearted but rough-hewn pioneer man, could do that?

Cattleya ascended the low platform in the center of the room. She arranged herself demurely upon the swing, skirts billowing out around her. Accidentally, she met Vance's stare across the room. Nervousness flooded her at once. During dinner, he had proven himself such a genteel and suave conversationalist that she had forgotten the cruel words he'd spat at her the day before. The echo of those words returned in full force to hit her again.

Yes, I want you. I want to fuck you. You are a fuck toy.

I can't do it! Cattleya panicked. I can't perform for him, knowing all the time what he really thinks of me.

Her heart pounded. Her stomach clenched. For a moment, she feared she might vomit. Finally, she steeled herself to go on. *There is nothing to be nervous about. After all, his opinion of me could hardly be lower. This dance isn't for him, it is for my true Owner.*

Worked cleverly into the grip on the swing was a control panel that operated various hidden lifts in the floor of the platform. Cattleya touched the appropriate

buttons, and out of a recess in the floor, an obelisk arose and unfolded to offer her a violin. She took this, positioned it under her chin and drew the bow across the strings.

A resonant note, sweet, clear and true, vibrated in the air. A cascade of sister notes followed in frolicking melody. After she had played the main theme once, she subtly nudged the control panel again without interrupting the flow of the music.

A pre-recorded holographic double of Cattleya, also playing the violin, sprang into existence at the corner of the stage. While the doppelganger took up the main melody, Cattleya switched to playing the harmonic counterpoint. The duet continued for several more rounds.

The next switch was trickier. While Cattleya played, the hollow obelisk ducked back down into the floor. It returned at the right interlude for Cattleya to exchange her violin for a new instrument, a viola. A second holograph popped up in another corner of the stage to keep up the alto violin part. Cattleya added the viola. The duet turned into a trio.

The third switch brought another new instrument, this time a cello. Cattleya sent the real viola back down in the hollow obelisk, but a holographic Cattleya continued to play the viola part in the third corner of the stage. The quartet was now complete. Cattleya played all four parts, via two pre-recorded violins, a pre-recorded viola, and the flesh and blood Cattleya on the cello. The strains of the lively divertimento wafted through the gilded room. The cycle was complete when Cattleya turned the cello over to the hollow obelisk and let the final pre-recorded eidolon take its place in the fourth corner of the stage.

Hands free, Cattleya stepped from the swing to dance to the music of the string quartet.

Vance idly twirled the remote to her vivavestita between his fingers. He watched Cattleya through half-lidded eyes, and his sexy, suggestive smile intimated that he planned to use it. The thought made Cattleya so nervous, she almost missed a step.

The dance integrated three living players—the dancer, the observer with the remote and the vivavestita itself. Even the simplest vivavestita cost a small fortune. The garment that Cattleya would wear could not be described as simple—floor length, seven layers and twenty-eight semi-autonomous elements. Triggered by the remote, the living elements of the dress would contract and move. The challenge to the observer was to manipulate the dress, in time with the dancer's own movements, to remove the layers one at a time. Faulty timing or poor instructions would result in failure.

Cattleya's movements, in time with the music, started out simple and sensuous. Vance must have activated the remote because the lianas on her dress lifted their flowery heads. The vines moved like tentacles, in and out they swayed with the music. The coils wrapped around the flounces of her dress, tugging the material aside in just the right way, so that when Cattleya spun around with her arms over her head, the outermost layer of her dress fluttered to the floor.

Yes. Vance had operated a vivavestita before. Still, the first layer was easy. The layers became more and more complex to unravel the further in, and closer to Cattleya's skin, they were. The tempo of the music picked up and Cattleya's own movements became more convoluted as well. Would he be able to keep up with her? Could he strip away all seven layers of the dress?

At first, she feared he would pull it off. The shrubby tentacles, which had been knotted to keep each successive layer of gown in place, unfurled one by one as she danced. The second layer, the third and fourth and fifth, all joined the first in wispy pools of gauze on the floor of the stage. She had to add spontaneous little kicks to her dance to shoo the impediments out of her way.

By the time Cattleya wore nothing but the final two layers, the sheer material whispered on her flesh as translucent as moonlit mist. Less encumbered than before, her body was freed to engage in more acrobatic moves. She took to the swing in a series of ambitious flips, leaps and twirls over, around and under the bar. Here, Vance's expertise seemed to falter. Instead of darting the lianas in the correct sequence to have the vines pull away the sixth layer, the flowery cords became entangled with the swing.

Cattleya should have been glad that he had failed. Instead, she felt a surge of disappointment. She told herself it was only because his clumsiness interfered with the conclusion of her dance. Whatever fumble he had committed the vines to make had resulted in her legs being caught up in the lianas, still attached to the swing.

Vance should not have been able to advance to the seventh layer of the vivavestita since he had misdirected the previous level. Yet Cattleya distinctly felt the cords beneath her breasts and at her hips snaking against her skin and slithering up her arms.

The vine tentacles were not supposed to do that.

She didn't realize what was happening until it was too late. The vines coiled up her arms and around her wrists, binding her hands to the swing ropes high over her head. Her legs were already trapped and the vines around her thighs and calves began to squirm again, hoisting her legs into the air to meet her arms.

Cattleya looked across the room and met Vance's eyes. Delight lurked there, and triumph, and lust. Forgetting her dance, forgetting the music that still played, forgetting her promise to obey his whims, Cattleya blurted, "You did this on purpose!"

His only acknowledgment was a throaty chuckle.

Now, at the last, the vines stripped her of her final wisp of clothing.

Cattleya struggled to free herself from the swing. The tentacles only tightened. She realized that he had maneuvered her into a position very like the one in which he had first found her, or, if anything, one even more awkward and humiliating. Her buttocks rested on the bar of the swing. Her body bent double. Both her arms and her legs pointed straight to the ceiling, anchored by the chains of the swing. This position rendered her utterly helpless and neatly exposed her cunt to him.

"My dance is over," she said. "Release me now!"

"Oh no," said Vance, toying with the wand in his hand. "The climax of your performance is just beginning."

Cattleya squealed. Wriggling toward her were the other sections of her dress, like lacy snakes. The nearest one raised its head, tipped by an orchid blossom, and began to brush its petals against her cleft. The shameful pleasure she had felt in the examination room flared to life again. She shifted her hips forward, seeking contact, harder, deeper, faster, even as her face burned with humiliation at her own wantonness.

"Let me hear it, Cattleya," Vance commanded. "Let me hear you beg."

Her whole body liquefied with surrender.

"Please, Vance," she whimpered. "Please, don't stop."

The vines curled closer. And still the music played.

Chapter Four

Something shoved her swing. A few of the living vines had crept up on her from behind. They began to tug the swing to and fro. The movement of the swing propelled Cattleya into the reach of the vines in front of her. The bud that had been nuzzling her clit buried deeper into her cleft. The soft ungulae of assorted other vines whipped her thighs and buttocks as she brushed toward and away from them. The harder the swing rocked, the more vigorously the vines thrashed her. She felt one of the tentacles snake into her opening, and once inside, every pendular motion of the swing caused the vine to pump her channel.

Other vines slithered up her body and spiraled around her breasts. All over her body she felt the questing tendrils and the teasing brush of blossoms, combined with the rhythmic penetration of the vine in her cleft. She quaked beneath the onslaught of pleasure.

Cattleya arched her back and opened her eyes. Vance had strolled across the room to stand directly before the swing. He'd removed his brocade jacket, unbuttoned the vest and loosened the collar on his shirt. The silky white blouse now opened in a loose V, enough to hint at the sculpted mass of muscle beneath. He watched Cattleya writhe before him and he exalted.

Although he did not lay a finger on her, Cattleya keenly felt his control. He still operated the remote. It was Vance who had commandeered the vines of her dress to tie her up and torment her, and Vance who enjoyed the resulting performance. She danced for him on his terms now. All her dignity abandoned her. She moaned and mewled for release, his helpless toy. His fuck toy. He played with her as he willed.

"Please, please," she wailed. She no longer had any idea what she said or why. "Vance, Vance, oh Vance!"

One of the vines slapping her underthighs zeroed in on her clit and smacked it with each approach of the swing. Her excitement crested into an orgasm. She bit down on one of the vines to keep from screaming out.

The vines released the swing. The arcs of the swing lessened and then stopped. Although vines still entangled her limbs and torso, and the vine that had penetrated her still throbbed inside her, Cattleya found she could lower her legs from the air. The muscles in her legs quivered. Surely now he would release her...

"Get up and bend face down over the swing," Vance ordered.

Her eyes widened. "But..."

The vine up her cunt surged, making her jump.

"Do it," he said. "Did you think I was done with you? I'm going to make you come and come until you can't stand up. Don't worry, Cattleya. You'll still be a virgin. Just enjoy."

Trembling, Cattleya settled prone over the swing seat. Her buttocks faced away from Vance this time. Her breasts dangled, heavy, over the foreside of the swing.

The vines went to work on her again. The plumb tentacle up her pussy resumed its eager plunging. From this angle, every dive it made inside her rubbed the rest of the vine directly over her clit. Other vines snapped vegetable spanks against her ass cheeks. A vine grabbed her by the hair and angled her head back, so she had to look up at Vance. As a second wave of ecstasy possessed her, he gazed intently into her face while she orgasmed.

"No more, no more," she begged when her shudders died down.

He laughed wickedly.

"Stand up and hold the swing chains over your head," he said. "This time, I want to watch your whole body as you come."

She stood up and grabbed the chains, as he'd commanded, but it was all she could do to hold on when the vines groped around her and began their undulations again. Another orgasm wrenched from her in mere seconds, so sensitive was she by now. To his obvious satisfaction, her whole body did quiver and ripple with the climax, which seemed to go on and on. Just when it crested and subsided, the vines squeezed and stroked her again, and a fourth time drove her over the edge of madness. She rose to her toes and flung back her head and thrust out her breasts and tensed every muscle in her body. The aftermath left her so weak that she collapsed at his feet, utterly drained and yet utterly content.

"Ah, my sweet Cattleya." Vance smiled, helping her to her feet. She shook in his arms. "That was a quartet performance worth witnessing."

"That..." Cattleya panted into his chest while he stroked her purple hair. "That was not exactly how it went during practice."

He laughed, a wonderful, deep throaty sound. He kissed her hair.

"Get some sleep, Cattleya. Tomorrow, apparently, we are to take a little trip."

* * * * *

Madame Bhothswara had words with Vance when she discovered that he intended to take Cattleya not only away from Blodeuwedd Seminary but offworld. The girl was not ready. She had never been outside the Blodeuwedd complex except to visit the labs for health checks. She had no concept of the outside galaxy. Vance rebuffed all of these objections by showing Madame Bhothswara the order from Mr. Royant-Bor. That ended the "discussion".

Cattleya had never been in a spaceship before, and she enthused over the idea with such little-girl glee as to convince Vance that Madame Bhothswara may have had a

point. For the embarkation, she wore another floofy dress, not a vivavestita, but a beautiful gown of filament silk that sparkled with diamante. The ivory cream color made her look like an ingénue. Vance had reclaimed his scruffy black armored leatherine, and did not feel much like the appropriate companion for a debutante. Not even a debutante with lilac skin, purple hair and nectar-tipped breasts. Especially not.

"Are we going to see Mr. Royant-Bor now?" Cattleya asked Vance with shining eyes. "Did I pass the tests? Do you think he'll be waiting for me? Oh I know he couldn't be as eager to meet me as I am to meet him, but do you think he might be just a little eager?"

"All I have are the coordinates he gave me," Vance said. "The coordinates don't respond to any of the planets where he has estates or mansions. Other than that, I don't know any more than you."

"He wants to surprise me." Cattleya had obviously determined she would see her Owner in a good light. She clutched Vance's arm. "Oh! Do you think... It could be possible, couldn't it? That he is going to meet me at a special place to get married, so we can start immediately on our honeymoon afterward?"

Vance had to look away from the innocent hope glowing in her heart-shaped face.

"Anything's possible," he said gruffly. He had told her he knew no more of what to expect than she, but that was hardly the case. He knew, for instance, that the coordinates given to him by Mr. Royant-Bor did not designate any honeymoon paradise, but rather an insignificant and disreputable deep space station.

Why take a creature like Cattleya to a place like that? Vance could only imagine what Madame Bhothswara would have to say on the matter.

Mr. Royant-Bor had provided a private transport ship, but it launched from a public spaceport several hours' train ride from Blodeuwedd Seminary. The spaceport bustled with unruly crowds. On any planet of the Earth Empire, the men and women would have formed sedate lines to purchase tickets and board ships. Not so in the Anarchion. Here, pushing and shoving was the rule, not the exception. The rich had cyborg bodyguards to do their shoving for them. The weak made way for the strong.

The rough confederation of the Anarchion had been founded five hundred years ago by Simus Rore, leader of a band of anarchists. Simus Rore rejected the bureaucracy, stagnancy and hypocrisy of imperial Earth and longed to create a paradise without laws, money or war. He proposed that in a society without prison guards, police, lawyers, soldiers, bankers, priests or tax collectors, men and women would be free to live in peace as creative equals. During Rore's lifetime, so compelling was his charisma and leadership, the paradise he imagined became real, for a little while.

However, within mere months of Rore's somewhat suspicious death, the illusion fell apart. It transpired that living free of prisons and police suited criminals more than law-abiders; without soldiers, bullies grew unimpeded from gang leaders to warlords; without laws and bureaucracies, no social force existed to forbid the creation of genetically engineered slaves, be they demifems, cyborg janissaries or clones to be used

as body parts for the powerful. As for doing without money, well, that did not last either. The Anarchion became the center of the black-market for forgery as well as illicit trade of all kinds.

The Anarchion elite, the Avants, had originally been a small group of intellectuals, friends and disciples of Simus who considered themselves the “avant-guard” of Rorism. These early, rather cerebral and naive Avants who had inherited Simus Rore’s political leadership upon his death were gradually purged, murdered and replaced by warlords and black-marketeers who raised their own armies of cyborg slaves, established huge “corporations” and plantations and dominated the Anarchion. Since no constitution or official government existed, the Avants’ whims and pacts became de facto law. The Avants even aped the gentry of the Empire of Earth, albeit without nobless oblige or a code of honor. The daughters of Avants married only other Avants. As a class, the Avants guarded their bloodlines even more stringently than Earth nobility, which perhaps was understandable since demi-humans had come to outnumber genetically pure humans four to one on Anarchion worlds.

This added to Vance’s doubt that Mr. Royant-Bor, an Avant, would ever deign to marry a demifem such as Cattleya. No matter how beautiful or gracious she might be, she could not bring him any more power, nor guarantee an alliance with a fellow Avant family, which was what most Avants married to secure.

In the airport, Cattleya’s exotic lavender beauty drew much attention. A considerable amount of that attention might have proven less than benevolent, but Vance walked beside her with two guns out and primed. Even oversized cyborg brutes who leered at Cattleya from afar had the sense not to try anything more aggressive.

At one point, a slaver passed by with a row of thirty or more demifems, bitch babes in this case, all chained together in a column by thick neck collars. Vance identified their breed by their canine ears, tails and sprinkling of fur. Other than the collars and the cuffs that bound their wrists behind their backs, they wore no clothes. The bitches yapped and barked as they scuffled along. An overseer kept them in line with a whip and an electric prod. One bitch snarled and tried to bite the overseer. He retaliated by flogging her breasts, belly and cunt until she whined and tried to lick his feet in submission. He grabbed her by the scruff of her collar and shoved her back into the column.

Cattleya had frozen in place to watch the ugly tableau. Her horrified stare attracted the slaver’s attention. Whispering to his overseer, he left his column of bitches and walked toward Vance and Cattleya.

Vance did not want the meeting.

“Come on,” he said. Cattleya hastened after him.

The slaver, however, was determined to intercept them. He was a smarmy man, a head and a half shorter than Vance. A scraggly goatee wagged from his chin.

“My friend, my good, dear friend,” the slaver addressed Vance in an unctuous wheedle. “I have an offer you can’t resist.”

"You're not my friend, and I'll resist your offer with this if I have to," Vance said. He shoved the muzzle of his laser rifle in the slaver's face.

The slaver swallowed nervously. "My cherished friend, don't be hasty. Hear me out. I see you have a Hothouse Flower – perhaps you just purchased her at an Auction in Hothouse Galleries? I am willing to part with all thirty-five – yes, my friend, thirty-five! – of my own inventory, some of the horniest bitches you'll ever meet, in exchange for your Flower. Just think how much more fun you can have fucking thirty-five cunts than just one. What do you say?"

Cattleya's face had gone white. Vance wanted to blow the sleaze's head off. He pulled back the trigger on his gun. The safety was not on.

"I say get the hell out of my way or I'll need to place a call to spaceport cleanup to wipe your guts off my boots," Vance said flatly.

The slaver held up his hands and backed away.

The crowd thickened and the press of bodies cut off the bitches and their keepers from view. All Vance had to contend with for the rest of the walk were two pickpockets who tried to rip some of the expensive material from Cattleya's formal gown, and the hoards of beggars, mostly mutilated survivors of the Avants' various petty, internecine wars, who lived in dirty corners of the spaceport year round. Cattleya took in all the sights and smells of the unwashed hoard. Her earlier glee over the journey had rubbed away into a pinched expression.

"Are you doing all right?" Vance asked.

"It's much noisier than I expected," Cattleya said. That was all. She kept close to Vance.

Both of them relaxed once they were seated inside the comfortable – and private – personal transport that had been provided by Mr. Royant-Bor. Cattleya's ample luggage had already been transferred to the ship straight from the Seminary. As for Vance, he carried nothing he couldn't keep on his person. Vance ordered a drink from the table between their chairs. He raised his glass in a question to Cattleya. She shook her head. He shrugged and downed the drink in one swallow. He relaxed into the rumble of the launch.

Cattleya gazed out the window as the spaceport turned into a doll-sized toy and eventually disappeared beneath a cloudbank. The curvature of the horizon grew more and more pronounced, and then the entire planet became a luminous globe floating against an inky expanse.

"Blodeuwedd. My whole world," she said, so softly he almost couldn't hear her. He suspected she spoke more to herself than to him. "My friends, my school, my entire childhood. How small it becomes, so quickly. How insignificant to the rest of the universe. I'll never see it again, will I?"

"I suppose that's up to Mr. Royant-Bor."

"Yes. I suppose it is." She sighed.

The captain announced they were to prepare for the jump to hyperspace. The windows blanked. Vance showed Cattleya how to fasten her straps. As his hands tucked the seatbelt around her hips and over her shoulders, between her breasts, he felt her tremble.

"Are you afraid of the jump?" he asked.

"No."

He fastened the neck brace and the arm restraints. A tear trickled down her cheek.

"Cattleya?" he asked. He caught the tear on his finger.

"Must you restrain my neck and arms too?"

"It's for your own safety. I'll strap myself in the same way. The red light means the restraints are locked down, the green light means you can unlock them again. As soon as we are through the jump, you can undo it."

She nodded.

The jump itself did not take long. The rumble of the ship changed to the distinctive buzz of hyperspace. They would travel this way for a dozen hours before jumping back to norm space at their destination. As he had promised, Vance helped Cattleya unfasten the restraints after the jump.

"Better?"

She nodded.

"Good girl."

"Vance?" She clutched her hands together in her lap. "Those poor women. The ones who were chained together. They weren't even wearing clothes. They were treated like dogs."

During his long-ago childhood on Earth, Vance had once had a spaniel who had been his best friend. He would never have treated Buster the way the overseer had treated the bitch babes. But it was time that Cattleya began to grasp the realities of life.

"They were dogs," he said as bluntly as he could. "Bitches."

"That's not a nice way to refer to women."

"And I wouldn't refer to a woman that way. That's my point. They weren't women. They weren't human. They don't have human brains or human feelings. They're genetically engineered playthings, created for sex. Bitch babes. Sex kittens. Love bunnies. There are different kinds, but basically all the same thing."

"Fuck toys."

"Yes, Cattleya."

"Like me."

"You're different." He shifted in his chair. He contemplated another drink.

"That's not what you said before."

"I didn't understand before. When we first met, you refused to talk to me, remember?"

"Do you think that Mr. Royant-Bor would exchange me for thirty-five of those kind of women?"

"No."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because bitches, bunnies, sex kits and all the rest are a fractifeeb a lay. You, on the other hand, cost twenty million feebs."

"I see." She smoothed her dress over her lap. "It wouldn't be an economically wise exchange."

Vance prodded the service table. He ordered a second drink. He poured it back as quickly as the first, without tasting it.

"Mr. Gardener? Will you be angry if I ask you a personal question?"

"How personal?"

"When you were married, when your wife Margaret was still alive—would you have exchanged her for twenty million feebs?"

"No."

"For thirty million?"

"No."

"For any amount of money?"

"No."

She bit her lip. "Do you think that it would ever be possible for someone to love me like that?"

Vance finally met her eyes. They were huge, luminous with emotion.

"Yes, Cattleya," he said. "I think it would be possible for someone to love you like that."

* * * * *

Cattleya jerked awake out of a dreamless sleep. A faint buzz in the air told her that they had not come out of hyperspace, but Vance was strapping her back into the chair. He looked tense, almost angry.

"I'm sorry, Cattleya, we're coming out of hyperspace early."

"Why?"

"Another ship has jogged our hyper field. If we don't drop out of hyperspace, both ships will implode. It could just be an accident, in which case, once we separate the supra-dimensional fields of the two ships, we can enter hyperspace again."

"But you don't believe it's an accident," she said, observing the way his muscles bunched with repressed rage as he strapped himself into his own seat.

He hesitated.

"It's better I prepare for the worst," Cattleya said.

Vance inclined his head. "I think that slaver back at the spaceport decided not to take no for an answer. I think he's going to try to steal you."

"Twenty million feebs must be a great enticement to a man like him," Cattleya said. She did not want Vance to know how frightened she felt.

"I'm afraid so."

The buzz increased tempo to a piercing whine, then dropped down to a rumble. The windows unblanketed to show the star-splattered black of norm space.

"Shit," said Vance. "They're hostile."

Cattleya did not understand how he could be sure so soon. Then she realized that the lock light should have changed from red to green by now. It had not. They were both trapped in their chairs.

Minutes later, armed men boarded the ship. They forced the captain and the pilot at gunpoint into passenger chairs and locked the two in, even as Vance and Cattleya were. The armed men were not cyborgs, as Cattleya had expected, nor were they scruffy, criminal-looking types. They wore neat, rather dapper uniforms, all matched in navy blue. The same barber might have shaven their jaws and buzzed their hair. None wore any insignia, rank or label that might have identified them, although it was quickly obvious they followed a chain of command and that the tall, fit, redheaded man headed up the chain.

The men at first ignored Vance and Cattleya, occupied as they were securing the captain and pilot. During those precious few minutes of distraction, Vance hissed instructions to Cattleya.

"They aren't slavers. They're Earth imperial guard. Either AWOL or on a secret mission. They might not know what you're worth. Don't speak to them."

In fact the redheaded officer appeared far more interested in Vance than in Cattleya. He sat down on the arm of Cattleya's chair, but only in order to address Vance.

"Well, well, Mr. Gardener, isn't it?" The redheaded man barred his teeth in a false smile. "Or are you going by some new name these days? Major Quenten, at your service."

"What do you want, major?" Vance asked tightly. "I'm no longer a citizen of the Earth Empire."

"Never imagined you were." Major Quenten smiled. "That would entitle you to rights. As just another piece of scum floating around the Anarchion, you have none."

"Get to the point."

"When you've pissed off the Emperor of the Earth Empire, you don't just expect him to forgive and forget, do you, Mr. Gardener? The Emperor's brother asked him as a personal favor to hunt you down and bring you back to answer to him. You know how our Nooly dotes on his brother. Can't refuse him anything. So here we are. Special

mission, very hush-hush, etcetera. I'm sure you already figured that much out. We won't take no for an answer."

"Then you'll have to take my corpse for an answer," growled Vance. "You can tell the Emperor's brother to go to hell. You can tell old Nooly that too, as far as I care."

The major casually backhanded Vance across the face.

"Don't think I care for your tone," Major Quenten remarked.

"Go ahead. Beat me senseless. I'm sure that's what the Emperor's brother would want."

Cattleya wished that Vance would not deliberately provoke the Earth soldiers. However, apparently Major Quenten had instructions to capture Vance alive and intact. The major pursed his lips.

"I can see why you wouldn't want to return to civilization," Major Quenten said conversationally. "Savagery has so many rewards. Like this nice piece of ass. Is this one of those sex kittens one hears so much about? What funny skin she has."

Major Quenten pulled back Cattleya's head by the hair. She gasped. The Earth officer tugged open the front of her bodice and groped her breasts. His touch felt coarse, not at all similar to the silken seduction of Vance's fingers.

Vance pressed his lips into a white line.

"Oh. Does it bother you, me fondling your girlfriend?" Major Quenten asked innocently.

"That thing is not my girlfriend, it's just a toy," Vance said. "But she is a damn good fuck. Take her and share her with your men, if you like. Maybe we could consider it a trade. Forget you met me, keep the purple pet."

He sounded as cold as stone. Even though Cattleya knew he was saying it only to protect her, the callous words chilled her heart.

"With the bounty on your head, I could hire all the whores I wanted," said Major Quenten. "Oh and Gardener? Just so you're not under the impression that I'll hesitate to hurt you."

Major Quenten stood up and pulled out a stick of some sort. He shoved this into Vance's stomach. Electricity, visible like a thousand tiny lightning bolts, crawled over Vance's entire body. Vance arched his back and thrashed under the licks of pain. He smothered a scream into a hideous, rasping grunt. When Major Quenten withdrew the stick, Vance slumped in the chair. A sweat had broken on his brow.

"Yes, I have to bring you back alive," Major Quenten said. "But short of killing you, I have full authority to do whatever it takes to ensure your cooperation."

Vance spat at him. Locked into the seat, it was all he could do to fight back.

Major Quenten lifted the stick again.

"Please, stop!" cried Cattleya. "Don't hurt him. Whatever bounty you hope to collect for him, you can get more for me. Take me in his stead. Let Vance Gardener free and I will do whatever you ask of me."

"Cattleya, keep out of this!" Vance said sharply.

Major Quenten turned to gape at her in astonishment.

"You speak? I thought your kind didn't."

"I have many skills," she said. "Give me a chance to prove how valuable I can be to you. In my luggage are the instruments of my art. I will perform for you. You will not regret it."

"I forbid it," said Vance. "Do you hear me, Cattleya?"

Cattleya refused to look at him. She focused on Major Quenten. The major tapped his fingers on his knee. He grinned slyly at Vance then nodded at Cattleya.

"You've made me curious. I think I shall allow it—on my ship, of course."

Chapter Five

The Earth imperial navy ship matched its occupants, neat and homogenous. Major Quenten had his men arrange a crude stage in an empty cargo hold. It did not appear that Major Quenten thought Cattleya would prove a better bet than Vance, however. The major placed a number of orders, from which Cattleya gathered that he intended his ship to cross the border back into Earth space as quickly as possible. She feared to think of the fate awaiting Vance at the hands of the brother of the Emperor of the Earth Empire. How had Vance made such a powerful and terrible enemy?

"Major," Cattleya said, desperate to delay him. "If you leave the Anarchion, you will not be able to sell me."

Major Quenten cocked his head at her. Dryly, he retorted, "My dear, although I appreciate your enthusiasm to sacrifice yourself for your lover, I have yet to see any proof that selling you would recompense me for what I would lose by freeing Gardener."

"Mr. Gardener is not my lover," Cattleya said. "I am a virgin. It is part of my value."

"Indeed." He seemed amused. "Which, according to you, is more than the Emperor of the Earth Empire can offer me as bounty for a long-hunted fugitive."

"Is the bounty you seek equal to twenty million feeb?"

"Twenty million!" Major Quenten whistled. "No dame is worth that. No offense, miss."

Cattleya lifted her chin to emulate a confidence she did not feel. "You will find me worth every fractifeeb, major."

"As soon as we jump to hyperspace, you may attempt to convince me," said Major Quenten. "The men will appreciate the entertainment. And naturally, we shall arrange for Gardener to watch as well. He seems to have a more possessive idea of his relationship to you than you do, my dear."

The Earth imperial guard treated Vance with a healthy respect for his potential to break free and break all their necks. Major Quenten must have been briefed about Vance's reputation. The soldiers stripped Vance of his guns, his armor and his shirt, and then manacled him to the wall at the back of the cargo hold. He was forced to remain in that precarious position during the jump to hyperspace, while Cattleya and the crew were provided with fold-down seats and safety belts along either side of the room.

After the jump, the soldiers unpacked the box that Cattleya indicated and created a low, makeshift table for her out of boxes. More and more crew arrived to crowd the cargo hold and witness the show by the strange purple girl.

Cattleya drew a deep breath and ascended the platform where she would perform. At the table, she arranged eight obloid tubes arranged by size from smallest, four inches, to largest, sixteen inches. The girls at Blodeuwedd nicknamed the things “squishies” or “squirts”. Officially, they were called flesh flutes, or just flutes. Each flute was long with a bulbous tip, although they differed in thickness as well as height. The flutes were hard, yet encased in a soft, fleshy vellum. Hence the name. Their nickname “squirt” came from their other most notable feature, the fact that, when properly played, they did not make music, like a reed flute or a violin, but spritzed out an edible, salty cream. Electronic music would accompany her performance, however. There were two ways to play the flesh flutes, *a mano* or *a lingua*, with the latter being considered the higher form.

She held up a pair of hand binders and turned her bare back to her audience to demonstrate that she was binding her wrists together behind her back. This indicated that she would play solely a *linga*. She knelt before the row of eight flutes. Her white skirts billowed out around her. Major Quenten had unlaced her bodice. Instead of closing it, Cattleya thrust out her breasts even more prominently. Several of the men whistled and called out lewd compliments until the major shushed them. Cattleya’s cheeks heated, but she reminded herself that this was exactly what Vance had predicted – that her body had been endowed with a strange power to make men desire her. She hoped he had not exaggerated. She did not feel nearly as confident in her powers of seduction as she pretended.

The skill in playing the flutes arose from the need to stimulate each obloid with a specific combination of strokes from the tongue, lips and mouth to bring it to spray. Cattleya bent over the first flute and took it in her mouth.

* * * * *

A low groan shimmied through the all male audience.

Vance could not believe his eyes. Just when Cattleya had convinced him of her chasteness, she pulled eight dildos out of a box and began to suck them before an audience of randy soldiers!

She began by licking the heads of the eight dildos. No ordinary dildos, these flesh-toned phalluses reacted like real organs, growing and stiffening under the laves of her tongue. Her strokes kept time with the hypnotic background music, starting out slow and teasing. She kissed and licked and nibbled up the sides and head of each pseudo-penis until all eight stood at attention. The music picked up pace. Cattleya took the smallest phallus in her mouth, down to the base, and bobbed her head up and down in time to the music.

The watching men responded with another collective groan of appreciation.

She pulled back just as the dildo erupted with a spray of creamy fluid. A twist of her torso caught the pseudo-cum on her left breast. Without missing a beat of the music, Cattleya repeated the action on the next largest phallus and caught the emulsion from

this dildo on her right breast. The third phallus in the row sprayed over her upper chest, between her breasts. Fluid dribbled down her cleavage. Her bare breasts now sparkled wetly.

Cattleya arched her back to thrust her nipples forward. The men yapped. A few stood up and had to be reprimanded by the major. Cattleya arched her back farther, so her breasts slid back toward her clavicle, and then, in a graceful but undefinable movement she dipped her head forward again and caught her own nipple in her mouth. She lapped the cream off her breast. Another arch of her back, another amazing undulation, and she took up the other nipple and scoured it with her tongue as well.

The men howled.

Vance flushed. His cock was as hard as that of every other man in the audience, but in his case, he also writhed in fury. He strained against his plasti-strap manacles. He wanted to strangle Cattleya. What was she thinking? Why was she doing this? Didn't she understand the animal lusts she stirred up in men who had been cooped up on a ship with no women for months on end?

Tremendous girth distinguished the next dildo in the line-up, but amazingly, Cattleya's lips distended around it. And on she went, down the line. Each pseudo-penis received a dose of loving attention until it sprayed its load. She hummed over the heads; she rubbed her breasts against the shafts. She took each of the vellum cocks, despite their increasing size, into her mouth down to base. By the time she reached the last dildo in the line-up, the true monster of the lot, the men were making bets as to whether she could deep-throat it. It bulged with realistic veins and ridges. Only a transgenic mutant or cyborg could have had a cock that size. It truly was inspiring.

Cattleya began by rubbing her cum-speckled breasts along its base. Then she licked up the shaft with long, flickering strokes of her tongue. The men could clearly see her pink tongue dabbing and teasing around the rim of the cock's head, just before the head disappeared into her mouth. She played with the tip of the cock for a while, popping it into one cheek and then the other. Finally, as the men began to beg and shout, she went down on the dildo...and down...and down... She deep-throated the entire, unbelievable length of it.

And then she came back up and went down on it again.

And again.

Even Vance nearly spurted in his pants.

The men erupted into a mob. They swarmed toward the stage, shouting out pleas and obscenities.

"I have a real cock for you to suck, honey!" "Suck my dick!" "I'll fuck you even better than that!" "If you want some, I got some!" "Let me show you what a real sausage tastes like!"

"Shit!" spat Major Quenten. His bellows for order drowned in the din.

Cattleya and her props disappeared behind the mob of lust-crazed men. She screamed. Torn pieces of her dress floated like confetti over the heads of her assaulters.

They're going to gang rape her right in front of me, Vance realized in horror. Then his rage resurrected in his thumping heart. *I'll be damned if I let them!*

He roared like a beast. All his muscles strained to the maximum and beyond as he unleashed a strength not normally his. The plasti-straps lashing him to the wall snapped and he plowed forward into the crowd, smashing heads and punching stomachs to clear his way to Cattleya. He also grabbed a stunner from one of his disoriented victims and laid low more enemies with the weapon.

To his surprise, when he finally caught sight of Cattleya, she was not flat on her back, stark naked, straddled by a dozen rapists. Of her dress, it was true, nothing remained but shreds, and her arms and legs were bare. That, however, only freed her to engage in the most astounding display of martial arts kicks and punches. A circle of downed opponents testified to her acumen.

"Vance!" she cried when she saw him. She fought her way to his side like a regular ninja. He had no time to appraise this latest revelation of her talents. Together, they ducked stun rays and attacks and fought their way from the cargo hold.

The hallway was empty, but enemies came spilling out of the cargo hold after them. They raced ahead of their pursuers, retracing the steps they had taken from the docking hold where their ship had been interred.

The captain and the pilot were still on the ship, bound in passenger chairs. Vance released the lock on the safety mechanism.

"Thank you, sir," the captain murmured.

"Can you blast our way free of the hold?"

"Oh this little ship can get through those doors without a problem. But if they get a tractor beam on us, we'll be right back where we started."

"Then the sooner we get started, the better our head start."

The ship blasted out the docking doors. Moments later, the vessel made the transition to hyperspace. Neither Vance nor Cattleya had strapped in to the safety chairs. The instance of transpatial dislocation caught them off guard and they were tossed like rag dolls to the floor of the ship. Cattleya's barely clothed body sprawled over Vance, who lay flat on his back.

She blushed violet and tried to pry herself free of the tangle of limbs. Vance lifted himself onto one elbow, and fisted his other hand in her purple hair, to keep her trapped on top of him. Rage and arousal still pumped in equal portions through his blood. Her soft belly pressed against his rock-hard cock. She blushed again.

"Vance, please," she said.

Aware that they had not yet escaped danger, Vance reluctantly released her. She rose and attempted, without success, to reassemble her rags into something more modest.

How well she played the innocent virgin, even now, Vance observed. But he would not be fooled again. Technically, yes, he knew from his examination that Cattleya had

never had intercourse with a man. Weighed against her genetic programming, however, that temporary state of “purity”, as Madam Bhothswara had called it, hardly mattered. By nature, Cattleya was a nymphet, designed to offer herself to men. Any men, all men. Why else had her first instinct, upon finding herself on a ship full of horny sailors, been to make such a sexual spectacle of herself as to provoke an out-and-out riot?

She could not help her nature. He shouldn't blame her or hate her for it. He even admitted that what angered him most was his hurt pride. He had imagined that he had a power to bring her pleasure under his touch that no other man could rival. That was vanity. Any man would do for her, any touch on her pussy, and cock in her mouth—even a dildo.

Cattleya felt his stare and his anger. She glanced at him and licked her bottom lip nervously. At the sight, his cock throbbed as the memory of her pink tongue lapping at the dildos and her lips distending to swallow the enormous phalluses resurged in his mind.

He tried to push the image away.

“You should be strapped in,” Vance said. His voice scraped like metal over rock. “Sit down.”

“Will they pursue us? What will we do now?”

“The ship needs repairs. We'll continue to our destination, the deep space transit station. It's unlikely that Earth imperial guards will dock there.”

He fastened Cattleya into the chair. He cuffed her wrists and neck and switched the chair to lock.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked. Tears brimmed in her eyes. “Why are you treating me like this?”

“I should have kept you chained from the start.” He towered over her and looked down at her coldly to hide the heat broiling in his loins. “I didn't realize how dangerous you were.”

“I was only trying to help you.”

“Oh is that what you call putting on a peep show for a horde of randy bucks?” He smiled grimly. “I don't imagine you were thinking of me at all, Cattleya. The only thought going through your pretty little head were sugarplum dreams of all that cock.”

Her cheeks deepened from lavender to purple. An admission of guilt? But she shook her head wildly. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“When we get to the transit station, you will leave this ship in chains.”

Anger and betrayal flashed in her eyes. “Like the bitch babes.”

“Exactly like that.”

He sat on the other side of the aisle so he would not have to watch as tears streaked her pale cheeks. She made no sound, nor did she protest again. She only lifted her chin proudly, through her tears, and stared out the window blanked by hyperspace.

Vance knew he could not let himself forget what she was and what his job demanded of him. He had started to think of her as human, as a woman. He dared not. He felt like a bastard.

* * * * *

Cattleya had not expected the tidal wave of reaction from the audience in response to her performance. She had played the flesh flutes many times at Blodeuwedd Seminary, and the girls had never once stormed the stage. Nor had Cattleya ever felt compelled to react so after watching another student play the flesh flutes. Vance seemed to think that she was the genetic freak, but Cattleya had reached the conclusion that it was males in general who had twisted DNA. Something must account for their inexplicable, infuriating and totally irrational behavior.

All she had intended was to convince Major Quenten of her value, so that he would exchange her freedom for Vance's. In the end, though, the riot had served them even better, allowing them both to escape, not to mention the captain and the other pilot. Why then was Vance so wroth with her? He said he hadn't realized that she was so dangerous, but surely he didn't fear her martial arts abilities. For one thing, she had seen him fight as well and doubted that she could take him. He seemed equal to her speed and agility, and far exceeded her strength.

Her emotions roiled in such a knot that even once they arrived safely at the deep space transit station, presumably out of reach of their pursuers, Cattleya could feel only marginal relief. That meager scrap of gladness died shortly when Vance made her stand still so he could chain her like a dog. Like a bitch babe. A sex toy.

Her tattered dress still cinched her waist but exposed her breasts and barely dangled over her buttocks and thighs. Unfortunately, Cattleya's luggage had been left behind on the Earther ship. She had no other clothes, even if Vance had been in the mood to let her change, which, given his iron expression, she doubted.

When she saw the chains he meant for her, however, she balked. Several sets of straps, cuffs and links had been stored in the upper compartments of the ship. Vance sorted through these and selected a set of black plasti-straps that encircled her thighs and then linked to a matching but smaller cuff that entrapped her wrists and pinned them to her sides. Another set of cuffs, linked by a short chain, connected her calves. Most degrading of all, a collar for her neck snapped to a long lead chain that Vance tucked in to his belt. She would have to patter after him on a leash, like his pet.

"I won't do it," she said, backing away when he tried to collar her. Her arms and legs were already shackled, so her refusal was half bluff, half blind anger. "I won't let you drag me out in public like this! I am not a slave."

"Your very conception was bought and paid for by your Owner. What else does that make you but a slave?"

His logic horrified her. Her lower lip trembled, but she refused to cry in front of him again. "I am not your slave. My true Owner would never treat me like this."

Vance scowled.

"You're lucky I don't strip you naked as well."

"You wouldn't! You have no right to expose to the public what belongs to my Owner alone."

"As you exposed yourself to the Earth men?"

Cattleya's face heated. She had done that to save his life, the ungrateful blockhead. *The next time the brother of the Emperor of the Earth Empire captures you to be tortured to death, I will just sit back and enjoy your demise,* she promised him in silent fury.

Vance took something else out of the overhead compartment. Cattleya recoiled when he grasped the frayed edges of her bodice top. Did he mean to make good his threat and deprive her of her last shred of modesty?

No. Instead, he used an antiseptic wipe to cleanse her breasts of the dried squishy cream caking them, and tied up the bodice as best he could. An indecent amount of cleavage still strained against the knotted material, but at least her nipples no longer peeked out. He finished his ministrations by snapping the collar around her neck. She hated how he disarmed her with small kindnesses even as he forced her to his will.

"This station will be rougher than you are used to," Vance warned. "You may not believe it, but it is better for you if people mistake you for an ordinary sex toy, rather than recognize you for what you are. Stick close to me."

"I hardly have a choice," she pointed out bitterly, jerking her chin at the leash.

"Keep your eyes to the floor. And don't speak, even if spoken to," Vance said. "I know you can be quiet when you've a mind to be. This would be the ideal time."

Cattleya clamped her mouth shut and glared at him.

* * * * *

She had to admit the chains were clever. If she minced her steps, she could still walk without too much difficulty, but it would have been near impossible to break into a run, a kick or a blow against an opponent. Vance measured his strides so that she could keep up with him.

He had not exaggerated about the transit station. Cattleya had thought the space station back on Blodeuwedd had been unruly. In retrospect, she saw it had been a bastion of civility compared to this place. Gangs of bandits and pirates, openly displaying their colors and cybernetic tattoos, roamed the docks. Human gangs rivaled cyborg gangs and both opposed transgenic gangs, each type keeping to its own and pitting its wits and brawn against the other. These rivals would not so much as pass one another in the passageway without flexing their implanted weapons at one another. Should one man brush against another, even accidentally, a fight broke out immediately, often drawing onlookers from either side into the fray. At least three brawls started or were already in progress in the first ten minutes that Vance and Cattleya disembarked the ship.

The captain and pilot remained behind with the ship to guard it. Any one of the pirate crews abounding in the transit point would have been glad to add the doughty little ship to their fleet.

Vance steered Cattleya around the brawls and through a sea of curious, hungry eyes. One man in particular took an unnatural interest in their progress, a mustachioed human whose bare arms were so covered in cybernetic tattoos that Cattleya at first thought he wore long silver-laced sleeves. His shrewd assessment made her shiver.

A few bandits and pirates were female, looking every bit as ugly, bloodthirsty and tough as their male counterparts, Cattleya noted. However, most of the females visible were naked slaves, marched along in rows, or else chained and leashed behind some man, as she was. Slavers thronged the crowd in numbers almost equal to the bandits and pirates.

A man-thing, transgenic by the looks of his hyena snout, ears, fur and tail, not to mention his nine feet of solid muscle, blocked their way. Drool slavered from his toothy muzzle, and his yellow eyes glittered. The crude armor lashed onto his body over his hairy thews hardly humanized him.

"Girl," rasped the hyena-man. His paw scrabbled at a bag on his belt. "Pay."

"No," said Vance. His hand stole to the gun at his waist, though he didn't draw.

"Girl me kind, not you kind, Human," growled the hyena-man. "Give girl. Take pay or pay with life."

Vance drew his gun. "She's mine."

"Puny Human die!" The hyena-man launched himself at Vance, knocking the gun from Vance's hand.

Vance sidestepped the attack, simultaneously yanking Cattleya's leash to keep her behind him and away from the hyena-man. With her arms pinned to her thighs and her calves linked close together, there was nothing she could do to help him fight. Her defenselessness angered her. If Vance hadn't been such a stubborn fool, she could have at least retrieved his gun for him.

Meanwhile, Vance handled the hyena-man adroitly enough on his own. After ducking another bear-hug, Vance snapped a gun from his boot and blasted the hyena-man's head off his body. The huge, headless corpse thudded to the metal plank floor of the dock. Vance kicked the thing out of his way to pick up his first gun and replace it in his belt.

Cattleya was pleased that Vance could defend himself, but it didn't change her mind about wanting her own freedom of movement. What if there had been more than one assailant? What if there had been a half a dozen men ...

...like the half dozen burly human toughs who appeared out of the crowd to surround them with guns drawn?

The mustachioed man whom Cattleya had noticed watching them earlier led the gang.

"You Vance Gardener?" he asked Vance.

"I am."

"I'm Karl the Mack, Boss of the Mackies. We spoke on the intercom earlier. You'll be under my protection during your stay here at our fine station."

"I admire your choice of timing to extend your protection, Karl," Vance said sardonically, with a kick at the hyena-man's corpse.

Karl shrugged, unapologetic. "I wanted to see what you're made of. Us puregene humans are getting squeezed more and more by the freakgenes and the metalheads. We gotta stay strong if we don't wanna go extinct. You're strong, Gardener. I like that."

"Thanks," Vance said. He pulled out his wallet and flashed some feeb. "I believe this was the agreed amount."

Karl waved his hand at the money. "Tell you what. Now that I see your kitten, I'll offer you a better deal. Keep your money, but let me and my boys fuck her."

"No."

"Just one night."

"No."

"Just me then. My boys can just watch and envy." Karl sniggered.

"No."

"Shit. You drive a hard bargain."

"I'll pay you the agreed sum." Vance had one hand on his gun. The other still held out the wallet. "Anything else, and we'll have to renegotiate our entire deal."

"Don't get jumpy. I'm just trying to strike a mutually beneficial exchange, not steal your property. So you want her pussy all to yourself? No problem. Can she suck cock? I'll even waive my price if you let her suck my dick. I want to squeeze her tits too. I thought I seen 'em all, but I never saw a fuck toy with purple tits before. And she smells real good. Like a flower."

Cattleya shuddered in revulsion at the thought of that man pawing her breasts. She shuffled a bit to hide herself more thoroughly behind Vance. The muscles in his back were as taut as steel beams.

"Look, Karl," Vance said. "Take the cash. It's the only deal on the table."

Karl reached out and pocketed the feeb that Vance proffered. Vance relaxed only the smallest fraction.

"The hotel is in the hub," Karl the Mack said. "Name of Ballsie's Boardhouse. Take this and tell 'em Karl the Mack sent you."

Karl handed Vance a bag of coins, a local currency, each chit stamped with the Mackies' own icon. Vance accepted it. He tugged at Cattleya's leash, reminding her again of her humiliating position. She could feel Karl the Mack's beady eyes drill into her back as Vance dragged her away.

Chapter Six

She didn't understand him. Ever since the confrontation with Karl the Mack, Vance had seethed with fury, apparently at her. *What have I supposedly done this time?* Cattleya wondered, her own temper rising.

Vance contained his explosion until after he bolted himself and Cattleya into the seedy hotel room at Ballsie's Boardhouse. Then he grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.

"Dammit! Do you have to lasso every man and half-man whose path you cross?" he growled at her. "Stop spraying your scent!"

She blinked at him in bafflement.

"Vance, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about your pheromones. You have hyper-feminine sex pheromones, mingled with an orchid fragrance, a perfume that you spray into the air around you. You've used it on me, you used it on the Earth ship, and you used it just now on the hyena-man and on Karl the Mack. Stop spraying your love potion!"

"Even if what you say is true, I don't know how to do what you want."

"And I suppose you don't know how to suck cock either," he said.

She flushed. "I don't even know what that means, I just know you're being rude, as rude as that man Karl, as rude as the hyena-man! It doesn't become you."

"Stop toying with me. Is that what they taught you at your fancy seminary? To play games with men? You're very good at it."

"I am not—"

"You forget, I was there during your little 'performance' for the Earth imperial guard. You knew exactly what you were doing."

Cattleya drew herself up. "Of course. I was playing the flutes. I've practiced it for many years. If that's what you mean. As for the startling reaction of the men, I have no explanation. The girls at Blodeuwedd Seminary never carried on in such a manner. But then I must say that the standards of etiquette at Blodeuwedd appear to be much higher than any of the other company to which you have thus far introduced me.

"Indeed, I dare say that on the whole your conduct has been reprehensible from the start," Cattleya said, her ire growing by the minute. "You have bullied me and debauched me. Instead of protecting my virtue, you have jeopardized it with your... your caresses and touches," she blushed furiously but forced herself to go on, "and instead of protecting my life, you have thrown me in the path of the same foes hunting you. And because of your carelessness, I have lost my vivavestita, which was priceless,

not to mention the rest of my trousseau and the instruments of my art, including the squishies."

"The squishies?"

"The flesh flutes that I played on the ship during the performance that you found so objectionable."

He looked incredulous. "You mean the dildos?"

"I don't know that word."

"What did you call them?"

"Squishies. Or squirts. Flesh flutes."

A slow, wicked smile spread over his face. "If you are mourning the loss of your 'flesh flutes', I have one that you can practice upon to your heart's content."

"You?" Her suspicions were high, and his smirk did not reassure her. "Why would you have such a valuable instrument?"

He laughed. His hands went to his pants. "You might say it was a gift from my parents."

Vance unfastened his pants and something long and fleshy sprang out. Cattleya froze at the sight. She felt faint and even swayed on her feet. An attempt to steady herself reminded her that her arms were still shackled to her thighs.

She felt stupid and embarrassed. Now that Vance demonstrated it so bodily, the similarity between the male organ and the squishies struck Cattleya as unmistakable. She had taken courses in human biology and anatomy and knew, in a general way, the nature of the male genitalia in a variety of mammals. True, those lessons had never been accompanied by graphics, as the strict teachers would not allow the giggly girls access to such smut, but the verbal description should have been enough. Yet Cattleya had never made any connection between the squishies and the organ of a living, human male.

Vance tangled his hand in her hair and forced her to look up at him. Her lips had parted in shock. She licked them nervously. The tiny gesture caused his eyes to deepen with lust.

"Do it, Cattleya," he commanded softly.

"Do what?"

"You know what I want. You've done it before."

She shook her head. "You have to believe me. I never —"

"Get on your knees."

His hand forced her down. She was still bound. She could not have fought him, even if she had wanted to. Not that she wanted to fight him. Only, he frightened and bewildered her, and he needed something from her that she was afraid she did not know how to deliver — or perhaps that she was afraid she did know how to deliver.

Kneeling brought her face parallel to his flesh flute. Oh the resemblance was uncanny. And yet this was entirely different than anything she had ever seen. This was no harmless object, but a living extension of Vance, thrusting itself out from between his muscular thighs over a thatch of dark hair.

"You know exactly what to do, Cattleya," Vance said hoarsely. "Don't toy with me. Do it."

Tentatively, she extended her tongue and flicked it across the flesh of his staff. His breath exploded from his lungs. "Yes. God, yes. Do it."

Encouraged by that, Cattleya began to lick more vigorously. His member did not correspond exactly to any of the eight standard shapes to which she was accustomed, although it fit on the larger end of the spectrum. Not knowing which of the special tongue movements she should employ, she experimented with a variety. She flicked and sucked up the shaft. She swirled her tongue in circles around the base of the head. She took the entire length of him into her mouth and accepted him deep into her throat, using the techniques she had been taught on the flesh flutes, until her lips met the bulbous sac at the base of the member. There she swirled her tongue around the skin at the base then eased back and forth along the shaft in an ever-increasing tempo.

An odd thought struck her. The squishies would spurt a salty cream at the end, showing her when she had successfully performed. But how would she know when she had succeeded on a live man? Surely he would not squirt like a squeeze toy.

She slowed her pace and looked up at Vance. She met his eyes. He had been watching her perform with a strange, half-tortured, half-delirious expression on his face.

"Please, Cattleya," he groaned. "Don't stop."

A frisson of pleasure tingled down her spine as she realized that he was begging her just as she had begged him. Although she was the one on her knees, in chains, she felt a delicious sense of power.

He still had his hand in her hair. He forced her head down, plunging his member back into her mouth. He now controlled the motion, delving deep through her stretched lips. Squishies did not take control! Cattleya almost choked before she regained her rhythm. She had to abandon herself to his mastery. He chose the pace and the degree of force with which he invaded her mouth.

As he picked up speed, riding her head hard on his shaft, she lashed out her tongue along the route he plowed, laving his pumping rod.

"Yes, Cattleya! Suck my cock! Take it! Take it all down your throat, take it all!"

His member—his cock—swelled and jerked in her mouth. A familiar spurt of cream, tasting of salt and other mysteries, gushed into her mouth. Ah. Cattleya swallowed eagerly, sucking the last drops off the tip of his head when he finally withdrew.

He staggered to the bed and threw himself down on it. "You are magnificent, Cattleya. The perfect whore. Worth every last fractifeeb your creators put into you and every million they demand as your purchase price."

Cattleya sank down to rest her thighs on her ankles. She said nothing. What could she say? Vance had told her all along why she had been created and she had not wanted to believe him. She felt sure the Seminary had invested an education in her to prepare her for finer things than mere rutting. But the Seminary had deceived her. All along they had been rearing her and her sorority for just this, without letting the innocent students know the ulterior purpose in their hidden agenda. To think that she had practiced all those hours upon the flesh flutes, performed and competed, only to find that the supreme purpose lay not in the abstract art but the carnal application of her mouth to a man's penis.

Worst of all, Cattleya had enjoyed licking and sucking Vance in a way that she never had with the squishies. Oh she had taken a certain pride in her performances, but never had she felt a thrill that tickled her between her own legs as she took one deep into her mouth. With Vance, it had all been so different, so delicious, a mix of power and pleasure, of control over him and submission to him, of two minds mingling as well as two bodies thrusting and swallowing.

What further proof did she need that he had been right all along?

Cattleya stared dully at the wall of the dingy room, her illusions and pretensions at last broken in shards around her.

* * * * *

On ancient Earth, men had believed that women had the ability to suck a man's very life force from his penis. Vance could well credit that theory at the moment. He felt as though he had poured his entire being into Cattleya. He floated on a sea empty of self for a few moments, savoring the feeling of ultimate release.

After an unclocked time, he sat up and stretched his muscles. From the bed, he admired Cattleya's flawless form. She had not moved. She knelt on the floor, hands chained to her side, hair streaming down her back, head slightly bent as if bowed before her master. The perfect slave.

"Did you enjoy that?" Vance asked her.

"Yes," she said in a low voice.

"How many other men have you pleased like that, Cattleya?" He fought his jealousy, but he had to know.

"None."

"Come now. I thought we were through with games."

"Believe what you want," she said listlessly.

He frowned at her tone. She had said that she'd enjoyed herself, yet despair tore at the edges of her voice.

"You must have practiced that before," he prodded.

"Yes. Many times. On the flesh flutes. Never..."

"Never on a living man?" He could hardly believe it.

"Never. I did not realize that there was...a connection. Until you showed me." Now her bitterness was unmistakable. "The Seminary never explained. But real ladies don't practice that kind of art, do they?"

Vance coughed. "Um. No. Not in the Earth imperial court at least."

"And the dance with the vivavestita?"

"Your striptease? An Earth noblewoman would be flogged by her father or brother if she wore a vivavestita that did that."

"Will you tell me also that a man has some secret organ I do not know of shaped like a violin?"

"No, Cattleya." He had to laugh. "No, to paraphrase Freud, I think sometimes a violin is just a violin."

She did not laugh with him. She continued to stare straight ahead.

"Everything you said about me was correct," she said in the same lifeless way. "I am just a toy, designed for one thing and one thing only. My Owner will never marry me, nor will he ever love me. He will use me, as you have. Once I have pleased him, according to his whim, he will lock me away with his other possessions and toys until he has an urge to use me again."

Cold shame drenched Vance at her bleak words.

He will use me, as you have. Her accusation was all the more damning for the fact that she did not accuse at all, she merely stated a given.

Vance stood up and lifted her from her knees. She would not meet his eyes, even when he tilted her face toward him. He fumbled for the keys to her chains and unlocked her wrists from her sides, as well as the straps around her calves. Still, she acted as though she remained bound, not moving.

"Come to the bed," he urged. "It is my turn to pleasure you now."

"You can do with my body as you wish," she said. "That's what it was made for."

"Cattleya. I don't want you like that. I want you willing and eager."

"Yes." She turned her luminous eyes to him. They were dry but desolate. "I was trained for that as well. Always to smile, no matter what I felt inside. Always to please the other, no matter what I wanted for myself. When I go to my Owner, I will always give him my smile and never burden him with my heart. But must I do that with you too, Vance?"

"No." He drew her to the bed, but he only stroked her hair. "No, I'd rather you not pretend, Cattleya. I'd rather have your heart than your smile."

His own words surprised him. He regretted saying too much as soon as he said it. What could he do with her heart, after all? He did not own it. He could not keep it. And the look she gave him twisted a knife in his gut.

"On the other hand," he said gruffly. "Maybe it is better if we both pretend. There are some things that I have no more control over than you, Cattleya. I was hired to do a job, that is all. Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

"Yes, Vance."

"I'm sorry."

"It is as it is. We must accept what we cannot change. I have always known that."

"Something else you were taught?"

She nodded.

"I was taught that human beings should forge their own destiny. 'To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.'"

"Yes." She smiled sadly. "But as the hyena-man helpfully pointed out, I am of his kind, not yours. A 'freakgene' I believe was Karl the Mack's term for it. Not human at all."

"Cattleya..."

As she tilted up her eyes to meet his, he bent over her and joined his lips to hers. He kissed her gently at first, but his tongue sought hers and the passion between them filled him with heat. His cock stirred to life again, despite its recent adventures. Vance had to wrench himself away before he pushed her back on the bed and sank himself into her. Her scent filled his nostrils. He felt drunk with her.

"God, Cattleya!" He shoved off the bed and went to open the air vent a little farther. "When I'm with you, I don't know if I am responding to what your creators made you to be, or to the real woman hidden inside the flawless shell. Can't you turn off those damn pheromones? I can only think of sex when I'm around you."

She squeezed her hands white. "I don't know how, Vance. If there is a way, they did not teach me at the Seminary. At least, not in a way that I recognize. Considering the squishies, anything is possible."

He seized on the change of topic. "Did you really not understand what the dildos represented?"

"I truly had no idea. We began our first lessons at Blodeuwedd Academy —"

"When you were still a child?" he asked in horror. The thought of making small girls practice on dildos repulsed him.

"Well, yes and no. We didn't have the squishies as such until we were older. First they taught us the art of sword swallowing. Once you know that, taking even the largest of the flesh flutes is easy."

Vance recalled her ability to deep-throat even the longest phallus. His cock tingled again. He decided this was not a good line of conversation after all.

"We need to buy you some new clothes. This station is unlikely to have anything in the league you're used to, but we can at least get you out of those rags."

"That would be welcome, thank you."

"Cattleya..." How he wished he could bring the light back into her face. "I wish I had never taken this assignment."

She bit her lip. "Do you hate what I am so much?"

"No. I hate what I am. You are right. I have used you. I have called you names, and I have abused my position to take advantage of you in ways I should not have. I cannot blame your nature. I have treated actual slave kittens, with no brains to speak of, better than I have you. Somehow exactly because you are not a mere slave kit, and yet have the body of a man's fantasy, I do not know what to do with you."

Vance paced the room, running his fingers through his hair.

"I am not a nice man. I have not lived in polite society for a long time. I don't know why Mr. Royant-Bor hired me. Maybe he felt that to protect you, a mercenary was more in order than a gentleman. Although, as you were right to point out, I have managed to put you in danger more than I have managed to protect you. I'm sorry about that. I'm sorry about everything. But your Owner is rich and powerful. He has not had to blast the heads off hyenas for the past decade just to survive day to day. Perhaps he is a gentler man than I. Perhaps he will be able to treat you as you deserve."

"As I deserve," she sighed. "Ah, Vance, that is just what I fear most."

* * * * *

Cattleya had to giggle at the clothes that Vance bought for her—black leatherine pants, blouse and armored vest, all form-fitting flex-weave. He even offered her one of his guns.

"I don't know how to use it," she said.

"I'm surprised, given your fighting skills."

"Madame Bhothswara said that martial arts would teach us grace and confidence as well as self-defense, while guns are only used by soldiers, mercenaries and thugs. No offense."

"None taken." He smiled. "Maybe I can take you to a firing range while we're here on the station and teach you how to shoot. In the meantime, you should carry one anyway. Think of it as an accessory to compliment the outfit."

Cattleya was leery of leaving the hotel, but Ballsie's Boarding served no food, so they had to venture out in search of a restaurant. To her surprise, her change in attire made all the difference in how people reacted to her. Men still gawked, but their expressions were wary. They took her for one of the bandit women, Cattleya realized.

There were no restaurants that did not also serve alcohol, so they chose one of the many crass establishments that were, literally, holes in the wall of the hub. The metal fretting of the station's structural, plumbing and electric systems formed the ceiling.

The walls were gun steel grey, and the floor permanently sticky from a long series of encounters with various substances that Cattleya felt it better not to dwell upon. Despite the early hour, most of the patrons were already drunk or drinking as fast as they could to reach that state. The place stank of beer, vomit, urine, rust and animal, although it was frequented only by puregene humans, no cyborgs or freakgenes allowed. Sex kittens didn't count, apparently. A few curled up on patrons' laps, purring in the men's ears.

When Vance and Cattleya walked in, no one paid them any immediate attention. Then a big fellow at the bar sniffed the air. He turned toward them. At the sight of Cattleya's exotic purple skin, his eyes widened and his nostrils flared further. He nudged his companion. Within a minute, the whispers and nudges had traversed the whole bar, which fell silent.

The big fellow approached them. "I'm Ned," he said. He pointed a finger to a broken sign that said Ned's Beer & Eats. He spat at Cattleya. "We don't serve no freaks. This territory is puregene only. There's other bars for your kind."

"What about those women over there?" Cattleya asked, pointing to the sex kittens.

"Those girls are slaves. I own them. You come back in chains and spread your legs for me or my clients, and you can stay as long as you want, pretty thing." He grinned to reveal a mouth of blackened, rotting teeth. "Your pussy sure smells good enough."

"You gonna take that, Catt?" Vance murmured at her side. He winked at her.

Cattleya realized that this too was a kind of test. If she didn't want to walk around chained up and leashed as Vance's property, she had to act the part of a warrior in her own right.

She pulled her gun out of the holster at her hip. She had never learned to shoot, but she had learned to twirl and juggle various objects, such as batons, firesticks and scepters. The gun was not much different. She twirled it from hand to hand and then aimed it at the proprietor.

"Where I come from, a gentleman addresses a lady with more respect," Cattleya said. "If our money isn't good enough for you, we'll depart. But I will not be insulted. Vance, show him the mint of our money."

Vance pulled out one of Mack's coins from the leatherine sack.

Ned rubbed his hands together and grimaced his black teeth in an obsequious smile.

"Well, now, no need to get testy, ma'am. Mack's money is always good here."

Vance tossed Ned the coin and they chose a booth as far from the other patrons as possible.

"They've mistaken me for a dangerous mercenary like you," she said. She could hardly believe it.

"It's no mistake," Vance said. "You are dangerous. The Earth imperial guard learned that to their sorrow."

"Oh but I could never be a mercenary."

"Why not?"

"A lady would never —"

"You're not a lady, Cattleya."

She paused, hurt. She had hoped he would not insult her anymore. She busied herself with pressing the buttons on the table for service. More than half the menu buttons didn't work.

"Try the slank. It usually works." He pointed to a button with a handwritten label scrawled next to it. When she pushed it, the table whirred and rattled and finally belched up a bowl of unappetizing muck. She wrinkled her nose.

"You're not a lady, but you don't have to be a whore either." He pressed the slank button on his side. After more rattling, a second bowl appeared. He started into it without hesitation. "Have you considered that maybe you don't have to submit yourself to Mr. Royant-Bor at all?"

"You mean run away?"

"Escape. Yes. The Anarchion is big, not to mention chaotic. And beyond the Anarchion, the galaxy is vast."

"Isn't it your job to see that I don't escape?" she asked. She pushed her spoon around in the slank. What, she wondered, were the lumps made from?

"I've broken rules before."

"I haven't." She had no appetite. She gave up on the slank. "I owe my entire existence to my Owner. To betray his trust would be a repudiation of everything that I am. Besides, am I to judge him before I meet him? How does that make me any better than these bigots?" She gestured vaguely to Ned and his clientele. "He might be wonderful."

"Even if he's the most wonderful man in the universe, you'll still be nothing but his property, his slave. Is that what you want?"

"It's what I am. You're the one who showed me that in no uncertain terms."

He flushed. "That's not what I meant to show you." Vance leaned forward and caught her hands in his. "Consider it carefully, Cattleya. Right now, Mr. Royant-Bor has no idea where you are. You might not have another opportunity."

As always, his touch sent shivers through her body.

"Why is it so important to you what happens to me?" she asked. "I'm just another job."

He stared at her a long time. Her heart began to pound. She didn't dare allow herself to imagine what he might say that could change her mind. She didn't dare hope.

"Cattleya..." he began.

Suddenly a light at his temple beeped and he sat up straight. A wire emerged from his forehead — he had an implant, she realized — and stretched out to flash a ray into his

eye. Someone addressed him, but Cattleya heard only Vance's curt half of the conversation.

"Sir! Yes, sir. Yes, sir, I'll have a full report. Yes, of course she's safe. Yes, sir. Are you certain, sir? Very well, sir. We'll be here. Vance out."

Cattleya did not ask, but he answered her anyway.

"Mr. Royant-Bor is on his way here to meet us."

Chapter Seven

Until now, Vance had only known the enigmatic Mr. Royant-Bor through written instructions. From those cold documents, Vance had formed a mental image of a stonehearted, scheming old man who relished his power over pretty young things such as Cattleya.

The real Mr. Royant-Bor proved quite different. He was young, younger than Vance, though a few years older than Cattleya. He had a handsome face under a halo of blond curls. Dimples accompanied his frequent smile, and a jolly light glimmered in his eyes. Charm, more than his expensive brocade jacket, gave him his aura of debonair. Beneath his expensive clothes, it was obvious that he kept himself fit and muscular. And the first thing he did upon meeting Cattleya was to pour honeyed compliments over her, fret over her wellbeing and exclaim how long he had dreamed of meeting her.

Cattleya's eyes shone. She flashed Vance a triumphant look, as if to say, You see? He is wonderful!

Vance hated him.

The Avant would not demean himself by stepping into the scruffy spacestation, so Vance and Cattleya met him in the dining room of his yacht for dinner. The service tables offered up a cornucopia of a banquet, which Cattleya cooed and sighed over, but Vance had no appetite. He felt nostalgic for the slank they'd eaten earlier, when it had been just the two of them.

"Attacked by pirates!" Mr. Royant-Bor shook his fair curls in dismay. "A shame, my darling, a shame. Thank goodness you escaped unscathed. Except that this crow's attire is all they left you to wear!"

Cattleya blushed. "I'm ashamed, sir. I had wished to look my best to meet you."

Vance thought Cattleya's pale lilac skin and curvaceous body looked damn fine in the skin-tight black leatherine, but no one asked his opinion.

"And so you will," promised Mr. Royant-Bor. "I admit, I brought you a present."

He murmured something into an unseen throat implant, and two servants brought a gorgeously wrapped box into the dining room. The servants untied the ribbons and opened the box to display a vivavestita of luminous gold.

"Oh my!" Cattleya clasped her hands together like a child. Then, spontaneously, she planted a kiss on Mr. Royant-Bor's cheek.

"Oh Mr. Royant-Bor, you shouldn't have. The Seminary's insurance policy should have replaced my lost gown."

"I wanted to give you a present just from me," he said. "And please, don't be so formal. Call me Lothario."

Lothario? Vance repeated mentally. *The man's first name was Lothario?*

"I have also brought you a replacement for your lost trousseau," continued Lothario. "So there is no need to wait upon the Seminary."

"Oh Mr. Royant-Bor, that is too kind," she simpered.

"Please. Lothario."

"Lothario," she said breathlessly. She gazed into his face with adoration.

I may throw up, Vance decided.

"Please. Put it on," Lothario urged. "The servants will help you change in the next room."

Once Cattleya had left the room Lothario Royant-Bor turned to Vance. The Avant's expression now turned sober.

"Mr. Gardener, I wanted to ask you out of hearing of my beloved blossom. Aboard the pirate ship – tell me the truth – was Cattleya violated?"

"No, sir. Cattleya is still a virgin. She remains pure of heart and pure of body." *She has the purest heart I know,* he thought painfully.

"What a relief," said Lothario.

Vance glanced at him sharply, detecting a false note in his mien, but Vance could not pinpoint what. Finally, he dismissed his suspicion as jealousy.

"You must wonder why I chose you to examine and escort Cattleya to me," Lothario said.

"Actually, yes, sir, I have wondered."

Lothario leaned back in the pile of rich cushions on his seat. "I know that you were originally from the Earth Empire. I know that your name has not always been Gardener."

Vance stiffened.

"Don't worry, I have no interest in collecting the piddling bounty that the Earthers have set for your capture," Lothario said with a wave of his hand. "All that matters to me is that you were once of the noble class and attended the imperial court. You are familiar with refinement. On the other hand, after you committed whatever heinous crime forced you to flee your homeworld, you lived a very different kind of life, didn't you, Mr. Gardener? First a failed colony, then a vagrant's life."

Vance inclined his head. He said nothing. He suspected that Lothario Royant-Bor knew less than he thought, and Vance had no intention of rewarding his fishing with more tidbits of information. He waited for the other man to reach his point.

"You've rubbed shoulders with the highest ranking noblewomen of the Earth Empire," said Lothario. His smile widened to a man-to-man leer. "And I imagine that since then, you've sampled many demifems in the backrooms of bars. So tell me, Mr. Gardener, now that you've met my Cattleya, where would you place her on that spectrum?"

"Cattleya is a true lady," Vance said.

"Even though she is transgenic?"

"She is human in every way that matters, sir. She has a mind, a heart and a soul of her own. She is no demifem."

"Is she proud? Dignified? Independent?"

"Yes, sir, all three. But also compassionate, honorable and devoted. She wants more than anything to please you."

"Tell me one more thing, Mr. Gardener. On the frontier, women consider themselves the equals of their men, don't they?"

Vance wondered what this had to do with Cattleya. "To be a pioneer requires a strong woman, yes, sir. Most frontier colonies are ruled by their own citizens, women as well as men."

"So I have heard. Cattleya's interest is in terraforming. Do you think she would make a good pioneer woman?"

For some reason, Vance didn't like the direction of the conversation. A small, inner voice warned him of danger. What, he couldn't imagine, but he answered cautiously.

"That I wouldn't know, sir. Perhaps it is something better discussed with Cattleya herself."

"Thank you, Mr. Gardener."

They waited a few minutes in uncomfortable silence. At least, for Vance the time stretched uneasily. Lothario appeared content to stuff delicacy after delicacy into his face. Vance wondered if the man always ate so prodigiously, and if so, how Lothario maintained his trim physique.

Cattleya returned. The gold gauze of the vivavestita billowed around her like a cloud of light. The servants had also dressed her hair in clips of gold set with diamonds. A diamond necklace encircled her neck and dripped down her cleavage.

"Oh Lothario, the diamonds are beautiful," she said as she swept into the room like a fairy princess. "Thank you so much."

Lothario's charm turned back on like a light bulb. "I have years of presents stored up for you, my sweet." He held out his arms to her. She hurried to his side. She didn't even spare a peek for Vance. "Cattleya, I have something important to tell you. Sit beside me, darling."

She seated herself in a circle of gold and beamed at him. "Yes, Lothario?"

"I want you to be happy."

"Oh I am, Lothario, I am so happy to be with you."

"Now, now." He held up a hand. "The fact is, you hardly know me. You have only experienced life in the Seminary. But I know that you are a woman with thoughts and dreams of her own. As much as I would love to take you back to my estate right now, it would not be fair to you. I do not want a slave. I want an equal. I want you to live on

your own for a little while. If you choose to remain on your own, I will free you from my Ownership. You will be your own woman. If you choose, however, to return to me and be mine, then I will know that what we have is true love."

Tears sparkled in Cattleya's eyes.

"Oh Lothario," she said softly. "I... I think I love you already. Just for offering me that chance."

He kissed her on the cheek. "Nonetheless, once you have lived on your own, you may change your mind. There is a cottage in a lovely settlement called Steeplechase Park. I bought it in your name, just for you. It is a gift. You owe me nothing for it. If you choose never to return to me, the house is still yours. The planet is Royantra III, an old power center of my family. Though it has been settled for about two centuries, there is a team of terraformers who supervise ongoing maintenance of the planet. I have found you a position on the team. I pulled no favors, except to show them your qualifications."

For a moment, Cattleya was too stunned to speak. Then she blurted, "I knew you would be kind!" and burst into tears.

Cattleya wept into his shoulder. Lothario patted her back.

Vance had to look away. His heart tightened.

Cattleya had found her dream man. Vance should be glad for her. Instead, he felt only desolation and foreboding.

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"But I have been babbling all afternoon and you have hardly said a word," Cattleya apologized to Vance. She bubbled with excitement over her new job, her new house and her new home. The "cottage" Lothario had promised her turned out to be a spacious, many-roomed mansion abutting several acres of parkland, woodland and semi-wild flower gardens. Other, equally elegant "cottages" encircled the park, which was an oasis of serenity guarded from outside influences by a high-tech security system and a legion of cyborg militia. Most of the mansions were second, or fourth or fifth, homes of various Avant class men and women.

"I'm sorry," Vance said, still subdued. They stood together on the balcony of the second floor of her "cottage" and Vance stared unseeing out at the rolling green hills of the park. "I'm happy for you, Cattleya. I truly am."

"But this is goodbye," Cattleya said. His melancholy infected her. "I will not see you again, will I?"

"I don't think our social circles will intersect much in the future," Vance said with a cynical smile. "But you deserve all of this, Cattleya. You deserve your happy ending."

She blushed. She gripped the balcony. "I have not earned it yet. There is something Lothario still wants me to do, some way he hopes I can prove myself. This is another test."

"What makes you say that?"

"Just a feeling I have." She shrugged. "I don't mind. I love him for giving me this chance. I think he is hoping that I can prove myself worthy to be his wife, not just his lover."

She glanced at Vance sidelong. "Will you mock me now, Vance? Will you tell me I have no chance of that, given what I am?"

"No."

"But you still believe it. You don't approve of what Lothario has done for me, because I am transgenic, not puregene."

"Cattleya." Vance frowned. "If what he has done is genuine, then I approve of it. It is your precious Lothario I distrust, not you. I don't like the man. There's something wrong about him."

"But how can you dislike him after all he has done for me?"

Vance gazed at her until she blushed and looked away. He stroked her cheek. Cattleya remembered all the times and ways he had touched her body, and she began to shiver. This time, however, there was nothing overtly sexual in his caress. His touch conveyed only infinite sadness.

"Goodbye, Cattleya," said Vance.

After he left, her mansion felt colder and emptier than before. She wandered from room to room, at a loss to explain her despondency when she had so much to be thankful for and so much to look forward to.

* * * * *

Several months later, Vance sat in a bar, drunk.

A love bunny with big bunny ears sticking up from her head, big blue eyes and big boobs hopped onto the barstool next to him. She wore nothing except a collar and a black halter that lifted her breasts and cinched her waist.

"Wanna fuck?" She flashed him a vapid smile. She jiggled her boobs.

"No thanks." Vance tipped back another swig.

The love bunny slid off the stool and bent over it so her bare buttocks and fluffy bunny tail faced him. The pink lips of her pussy could be seen peeking between her thighs. She glanced back coyly over her shoulder.

"Wanna fuck?" she repeated. She wagged her tush. "I fuck you good!"

It had been a long time. Her tail tempted. Why not take her offer? He still had a flush account from his job for Lothario Royant-Bor.

"No thanks, sweetie," he repeated.

The love bunny did not waste any time on regrets. She bounced off the stool and scuttled over to offer herself to the next customer. The man handed her a coin of local currency and opened his pants right there. The love bunny took his dick into her mouth

and bobbed her head up and down. Vance remembered the feel of Cattleya's tongue on his own cock. He threw down a coin on the bar counter and stumbled out of the dark room into the glare of a space station corridor.

Dammit. He hadn't been in this bad of shape since immediately after Margaret had died. But Cattleya hadn't been his wife. She hadn't been anything to him except a job. He kept telling himself that over and over, hoping it would help. So far, it hadn't.

A part of him knew that he could not go on like this. It would kill him. He had even considered returning to the Earth Empire, despite knowing what awaited him there. What did he have to lose? Perhaps it was time to settle his old debts.

A beep sounded again like a gong in his alcohol-addled brain. Damn, couldn't the implant just shut up? He knew someone had tried to call him, but he wasn't interested. He'd decided after he left Cattleya that he didn't need a new job until he finished drinking away the cash from this one. It wasn't his usual approach, but he felt it appropriate in this case.

Beep.

Shit. He might as well read the message, just to shut up his implant. He toggled the implant and the wire extended to flash a picture in his eye.

"Mr. Gardener. I was satisfied with your previous work. If you are interested, I have another job for you."

It was Lothario Royant-Bor.

* * * * *

Cattleya bid her colleagues at the Royantra III Terraforming Center goodbye for the evening and took the train home to Steeplechase Park. At first she had been intimidated by her new environment. She was especially unused to working alongside men. In time, however, she discovered that the actual work was not challenging, and boredom, ironically, became more of a difficulty than keeping up with the work. Also, she could not quite seem to make any friends among her co-workers. They always seemed to be smirking at her, as if they knew something she didn't. None of them did much work. They were all younger members of Avant families, puregene of course, who had secured their jobs through family connections. Some of them did not even have degrees in terraforming.

Horace Sharo-Royant, the worst of her co-workers, low-ranking scion of the spawning Royant family, made no secret of both lusting after and despising Cattleya as a transgenic. Often Cattleya had caught Horace smirking at her as if he knew some dirty secret about her. Once, in the elevator crowd, he had pinched her butt from behind, and when she'd turned to confront him, his haughty, unrepentant sneer dared her to publicly denounce him. She had moved away from him instead, too intimidated to do so. After that, she had avoided being close to him.

Cattleya found her situation a bit disconcerting. She told herself over and over that she should be grateful she had found a job at all. As for the loneliness that plagued her, well, that would end once she married Lothario. She tried not worry that even this, her oldest dream, had lost some of its appeal. The man who visited her in her dreams was not the golden-haired Avant who had given her so much, but a rougher, darker man who touched her in ways that made her blush upon waking. Her infidelity, even if only in dreams, shamed her.

She disembarked the train. A small, coin-pay robot car would now take her back to her cottage. However, as she strolled toward the car park, admiring the sunset, several men approached her. Cattleya paused. Something in their demeanor triggered a warning. Without waiting to understand why, she began to run.

They pursued her.

More men cut off her path to the car park. Cattleya fought them, injuring several before their sheer numbers overwhelmed her.

"Goddammit!" shouted one of the men, picking himself up from the pavement. "Nobody said the bitch could fight."

He rubbed his broken nose, winced, and then slapped her, hard. "You'll pay for that, slut."

Although it had been several months, and Cattleya had seen the man before only briefly, she recognized him. This short, ugly man with a goatee now stained with blood from his nose was the slaver who had tried to buy her from Vance back on Blodeuwedd.

"You! What do you want with me?"

"What do you think, whore?" he leered. "It's time to teach you your proper place in the universe. I should have had you in my kennel a long time ago, but that other ship overtook yours before my boys could make their move. Doesn't matter. You're mine now, bitch."

* * * * *

Compared to Lothario's prime estate, the house he had bequeathed to Cattleya deserved the belittlement "cottage". The estate covered a fourth of a continent on a world named Borgia, for the Bor family of Avants. Other Bors lived there as well. Even the nobility of Earth did not live in such extravagance as the Avants of the Anarchion. On the other hand, Vance thought, the poor of the Earth Empire did not dwell in such squalor as the beggars of the Anarchion either.

Servants escorted Vance through the gilded rooms until he reached a glass-enclosed solarium where Lothario reclined on a white couch. A feast arrayed the table before him, and Lothario ate heartily of the selection. Vance noted that the young man had let himself start to go to waste in just a few months. His muscles now showed less tautness and his belly had definitely expanded.

Outside and slightly below the solarium, in a large, shallow pool, beautiful naked young men splashed and swam. Vance wondered who they were, and why Lothario wanted to watch naked men play. There was the obvious conclusion, of course, but if that were the case, then why had Lothario gone through the trouble to commission a twenty-million-feeb female sex toy? Unlike in the Earth Empire, where homosexuality hid behind closed doors, the Avants had no qualms about taking either male or female lovers. However, the matter was none of Vance's business, and he did not inquire. Lothario himself introduced the topic.

Lothario gestured with a chocolate-topped taco to the men in the pool. "Handsome lot, aren't they? Do you think any one stands out from the rest?"

The question made Vance squirm. Although he had tried to shed the prejudices of his upbringing, old habits died hard. "I'm not a good judge, sir," he replied neutrally.

"I'm getting tired of blonds," Lothario commented. "I might try a redhead next time. It's been a while since I've done a redhead. My sister loves them, but I used to think they were too trite. What do you think?"

Vance made a noncommittal sound.

Lothario grinned. "I suppose this topic would be outside your area of expertise."

"Quite."

"Earthers are so squeamish about such things." Lothario laughed and stuffed the taco into his mouth. Around a mouthful of food, he said, "I called you here for an important job, Mr. Gardener. It concerns Cattleya."

Vance came to attention. "Sir?"

"She's been kidnapped."

For a moment, Vance had to struggle to contain his anger. Cattleya had been kidnapped and Lothario had wasted time sitting there smirking and joking about his male lovers instead of saying so at once?

"Do we have any idea who kidnapped her, sir?"

"None at all." Lothario did not appear overly concerned. "But I have confidence in your ability to hunt them down and rescue her. Are you willing to take on the job?"

"Yes, sir. Who else will be searching for her?"

"Just you."

Vance stared at him. Again, Vance had to struggle to dampen his fury. "Your confidence in me is flattering but undeserved." He reached for an argument that might sway the callous Avant. "She is worth twenty million feebs."

"Oh but I freed her, remember?" Lothario smirked. "No, don't glare at me so, Mr. Gardener. Of course I am worried sick about my little blossom. But I am afraid to stir up too much fuss, least we alert the kidnappers that someone is looking for her. Because she officially was living as a free and independent woman, I am hoping that the kidnappers don't realize my abiding concern for her welfare. I want to keep a low profile."

The explanation only partially mollified Vance, but he had to accept it.

"I'll find her, sir."

"I know you will." Lothario picked up a tart. As he munched it, he said, apparently to his throat implant, "Bring in that tall redhead near the end of the pool, the one who was so deliciously cocky and proud last time I spoke with him. I want to see him up close."

Thankfully, another servant escorted Vance back out of the room before he had to witness that meeting.

* * * * *

The slavers blindfolded her and bound her wrists behind her back. She expected them to whisk her offworld at once. Instead, they rented a robo-car from the car park and drove her somewhere not a great distance from her own house. The head slaver, whom the others called "Gustaff" or "Boss", ordered his minions to remove Cattleya's blindfold.

"Let the slut see what's in store for her," he said nastily.

Dusk had fallen, but artificial lights illuminated a compound with a dirt courtyard and several barn-like buildings. To Cattleya's surprise, she recognized Steeplechase Park beyond the electric security mesh-wall of the compound.

"Welcome to Steeplechase Lodge," said Gustaff.

Steeplechase Lodge! Cattleya knew of it. She had never been here before, of course. It was an exclusive gentleman's club, which accepted neither female nor non-puregene members. A few of her male colleagues at work belonged. She had heard them snicker about fox hunts held there, although they always stopped talking if they noticed she had entered the room.

"Seeing as you're such a fancy piece, let me give you the grand tour of your new home," said Gustaff. Gustaff entered the nearest building. The guards shoved her along after him.

Bare wire cages lined the walls of the building. Each cage held a naked girl, a water bottle, a food dish and nothing else. No, the inmates were not exactly girls, but bitch babes, with snouts, ears and tails. The cages were elevated a few inches off the floor, and human excrement filled the gutter underneath them. The stench appalled Cattleya. The bitch babes in the cages began to snap, snarl and bark at the visitors.

"Our hunting hounds," said Gustaff. "They are as specialized as you are."

"Are they intelligent?" Cattleya asked, horrified by the thought. It was bad enough to treat any creature in such a manner, but sentient beings...

"As intelligent as they need to be. They can fuck. They can hunt. You'll soon see how well."

Gustaff left the bitch babes baying behind them and escorted her to another building in the compound. This room had been divided into stalls, and each stall held a

demifem, except in this case, they had the manes and tails of horses. Their hands and faces looked normal, but they had hoofs instead of feet.

"Our ponies," said Gustaff. "They give our members a good ride." He laughed at his own joke.

Cattleya felt sick.

"And now for the fox cages," said Gustaff.

Their final destination was another barn, smaller than the other two, again with cages. Cattleya had expected to see demifems, so the six vixens, girls with fox ears and tails, were no surprise to her. In addition, however, there were two other unusual female prisoners. The pale blonde resembled a pony more than a fox. A golden horn protruded from her forehead. The other woman, a brunette, looked fully human. These two did not make any animal noises at the visitors, but watched them in wary, brooding silence.

Gustaff's men stripped Cattleya naked. Gustaff whistled.

"You are quite a piece of work, ain't you, girl?"

Gustaff reached out and squeezed one of Cattleya's breasts. She flinched. His gross fingers lowered to part her labia. Unlike when Vance had explored her body, she felt no arousal, only disgust.

"Like flower petals," Gustaff marveled aloud.

To Cattleya's relief, he tired of playing with her and had his men shut her into one of the cages.

"Tomorrow," Gustaff said with an evil grin. "Tomorrow the fun begins."

Chapter Eight

"Do you think she knows how to speak?"

"Probably not. Look at her. Transgenic. Must be a demifem."

"You're transgenic too, yet you're not a demifem and you speak," the brunette said to the blonde.

The blonde tossed her silky platinum mane. Her golden horn, rising from her forehead like a tiara, glinted even in the dim light of the barn. "I told you. Unicornae are different."

The women in the other cages whispered, but Cattleya could hear them. She wondered if she should try to hide her intelligence, then recalled that she had already spoken to Gustaff, who seemed to know all about her anyway. She decided there was no point in lying to her fellow captives. Perhaps she might find allies. Certainly, she was relieved to know that they were not demifems.

"I can speak," she said. She pitched her voice low, as they had, but loud enough to carry. "My name is Cattleya."

The two women who had been whispering looked at her in surprise. The brunette asked Cattleya, "What are you?"

"I'm from Blodeuwedd," Cattleya said. She wasn't sure that would help, but the brunette's eyes widened.

"Oh! A Hothouse Flower."

"Yes."

"I've never heard of those," said the Unicorna. Like the pony girls, she had hoofs instead of feet, tucked daintily beneath her at the moment. Her silver mane and pearl skin luminesced.

"My oldest brother bought one at an auction. He went into debt for it. Father was furious. She was a Yellow Rose, I think. I only saw her once. She was very beautiful, and she smelled so sweet, like a real rose, but she never said anything in my presence. I didn't know she could talk. In the end, Father took her for himself, as usual."

"You're an Avant," Cattleya said to the brunette. "How did you end up here, like this?"

"Same as you. Someone paid Gustaff to teach me a lesson," the brunette said bitterly. "Probably my stepmother. She hates me. But it could have been my stepbrother Maros. He's just as vile as she is. He wanted me for himself and when I refused him, he swore he would humble me. I know he's a member of this club."

Like most of the Blodeuwedd girls, growing up, Cattleya had often wished in secret for a real family. She had always assumed that nothing could surpass being born to an Avant family—love, wealth and freedom all in one. Apparently, her image did not always correspond to the reality.

“What is your name?” Cattleya asked the brunette. When the woman hesitated, obviously ashamed, Cattleya added, “Just your first name, if you wish.”

“Lyndra.”

“And I’m Hellenia,” said the blond. “The other six girls here—the vixens—can’t talk, they’re all demifems.”

“How did you come here?” Cattleya asked Hellenia.

“My Owner is a member here, but he also collects his own private stable of pony girls. He bought me from the Ranch where I was reared, and tried to train me to take a bridle. But I fought him and ran away. I even cut off my horn to try to pass as a pure-gene, but my disguise was easily uncovered. My Owner caught me and brought me here to be punished. Gustaff also tried to put me in the stable with the pony girls, but I bit the grooms. So he said if I wouldn’t be a pony, I would have to be a fox.”

Hellenia shuddered.

“The Club members will hunt demifems if they have no other prey,” explained Lyndra. “But their favorite prey is a thinking woman that they want to humble and humiliate.”

“Do they really hunt down women and kill them?”

Lyndra and Hellenia laughed but not pleasantly.

“Little sister,” said Hellenia, “they will make you wish they had killed you. If the demifems play the hounds that day, you will merely be molested and rubbed while the club members look on and leer. What really terrifies me, though, is the cockhounds. God help you if they’re unleashed.”

“The what?”

“The cockhounds are transgenic,” Lyndra said. “But demimen, not demifems. Male. More than male. They’re seven to nine feet tall and have the biggest, scariest cocks you’ve ever seen in your life. If they hunt you down, they gang rape you when they catch you. You asked if we would be killed. Not usually, but some girls, especially virgins, don’t always survive that treatment. You’re not a virgin, are you?”

Cattleya bit her lip.

“Well,” said Lyndra lamely, “Gustaff doesn’t usually unleash the cockhounds unless he has a client who really wants to degrade a girl. Did anyone pay Gustaff to kidnap and humiliate you?”

“I don’t think so. He saw me several months ago and wanted to own me. When he found I lived so near, the opportunity must have been irresistible to him.”

“Then all you have to worry about is being raped by the club members,” said Lyndra. “Most of them have cocks that can only be found with an electron microscope.”

On the whole, that wasn't very reassuring.

* * * * *

The first day lasted an eternity. After that, however, each successive day repeated the nightmare of the first, until days blended into weeks.

The daily routine began early. Handlers roused the vixens, including Cattleya, Lyndra and Hellenia, from their pens and bound them in leather harnesses and muzzles. Otherwise, the women were naked. The harnesses had several modes; the devices usually affixed the girls' wrists to the small of their back. Armless, the girls had to eat face first out of a trough of slops. The food reminded Cattleya of skank, except viler. The first week, she hardly touched it, but hunger gradually overpowered her aversion. After "breakfast", the girls had to practice running, climbing and crawling along an obstacle course. Bitches, ponies and vixens all "trained" on the same course, although not at the same time. The bitches would bite the vixens if allowed near them. It seemed the hound girls had been taught to attack at the smell of fox. The handlers shouted orders and imprecations at them and forced them from task to task with nasty whips.

In the afternoon, the demifems were allowed to loll in the shade and rest. The women, on the other hand, often spent the afternoon undergoing degrading and painful "punishments" for various infractions they might have committed during the day. Refusing an order, speaking back to a handler, half-hearted performance on the obstacle course or any other show of defiance—even a fierce glare—earned a woman a turn lashed ass up over the whipping bench. Or worse. The most humiliating punishments were explicitly sexual in nature, for instance, having to suck the cock of one of the handlers or to crouch for an hour at a time impaled upon a saddle with a phallus in the center.

The club held a formal foxhunt twice a month. In between, club members might visit to witness or assist the "training" of the bitches, ponies and vixens. Also, every night, the club served a banquet, open to all members. Usually between thirty and sixty men dined there on any given night. The demifems served in the banquet hall. They brought out the platters of food to the diners then knelt at the feet of the men, whining and begging for food. The men tossed the demifems scraps only if the girls performed tricks, which might include everything from crawling on their bellies, performing fellatio or full intercourse.

On several evenings, Hellenia and Lyndra were forced to join demifems in serving the men in the banquet hall. For some reason, the handlers never ordered Cattleya to the hall. She was grateful, although there was a down side. This meant she went without dinner each night, except for what Hellenia or Lyndra could smuggle to her of the scraps they earned.

Exclusion from dinner service was not the only way that fortune favored Cattleya. Hellenia and Lyndra both suffered many more whippings and punishments than she.

Cattleya had never been exposed to such a crude, perverse and brutal environment, but she had been put through grueling tests, both physical and mental, all her life, and she had been trained to obedience.

Not so with Hellenia and Lyndra.

Hellenia described the Ranch where she had grown up as a world of open fields and streams where the Unicornae children roamed free all day. They raced each other, played games of tag and hide-and-seek, planned pranks against their rivals and in general whiled away the days in mischief. As to formal schooling, they had none; Hellenia was intelligent but not educated. She could not even read or write. After a girlhood of total freedom, Hellenia found submission to any discipline almost impossible to abide. Over and over, she balked at the orders of the handlers, snapped back at them, deliberately kicked over parts of the obstacle course with her hooved feet and, more than once, physically tried to run away. When her Owner came to watch her train one day, she broke free of her bridle and managed to spear him in the arm with her horn. For that, she was branded with a hot iron. Though she was the most physically fit of the three women, with a runner's thighs and calves that could swallow ground like a train, many a day dawned to see her backside so crisscrossed with lashes that she could not move from the floor of her cage.

Lyndra, the pampered Avant's daughter, would not have survived as many beatings as Hellenia, but since the fragile brunette was even more proud and defiant of her captors, they punished her with humiliation instead. Her stepbrother Maros showed up to orchestrate her degradation. The first day Gustaff escorted Maros into the pens, Lyndra's face went white.

"Maros!" Lyndra spat at him.

"Hello, dear stepsister." He snickered at her. "You should have submitted to me when you had the chance. Your coyness was futile. I'm still going to have you, and I'm going to share you with all of my friends."

"Father will find out."

"Indeed. You will tell him yourself what you've done—and how much you enjoyed it—once you are trained to be my docile slave. He'll finally see you for the slut you are."

"Never!"

Every night she repeated that vow aloud to both Hellenia and Cattleya. "I will never let him break me. Never! Never!"

Maros had no shame about what he did to Lyndra. A robo-camera accompanied him and recorded every time he spanked or groped her as part of her punishments. His friends, as he had promised, also came to enjoy her humiliation, which was all the worse since she knew all of them as well.

After a fortnight in hell, things took a turn for the worse—a foxhunt. One of the demifem vixens and one of the women would have to run in the hunt as the quarry.

Gustaff chose Hellenia.

"Your Owner will give you one last chance," said Gustaff. "You may run with the ponies instead of the vixens if you choose."

"Never," said Hellenia, echoing Lyndra's favorite vow.

"You will not leave this place until you have ridden with the hunters on three foxhunts," warned Gustaff. "Only then will your Owner take you back."

Hellenia's jaw dropped, but not for the reason that Cattleya imagined.

"You mean he is willing to take me back?" Hellenia asked. She sounded almost... wistful.

"Only once you are broken to the bridle as befits a good pony girl," said Gustaff.

"Hellenia!" cried Lyndra. "You can't want to go back to that brute! He's the one who had you sent here in the first place!"

Annoyed, Gustaff gestured to the handlers. "Peg the pussy of that big-mouthed slut to the saddle for the night, and gag her with another dildo until she learns to keep her yap shut."

* * * * *

Hellenia did not return to the pens. Lyndra asked what happened to her, and for once, she was not assigned a punishment for speaking without being addressed. Instead, Gustaff himself arrived a few minutes later with Hellenia on a leash and bridle behind him. She kept her head bowed, with her silvery mane falling half over her face and her lowered eyes.

"Tell them, slave."

"I serve my Owner now," Hellenia said, without raising her eyes. "I run with the ponies as he bids me."

"Hellenia!" Lyndra said.

"I love him. I belong to him, Lyndra," Hellenia said softly. "I realize now what I need is a man to master me. I can't help it. It's just how I am."

After the gloating Gustaff left with Hellenia, Lyndra began to swear. Cattleya wondered what they had done to Hellenia to make her change her mind. Lyndra directed her fury at Hellenia herself, which seemed unfair.

"What can you expect from a freakgene?" Lyndra asked nastily. "She can't help it, she says! Well, maybe she can't. She's no better than a demifem. A genetically engineered whore grown in a vat. More horse than human! And you, Cattleya—"

Cattleya blinked in surprise as Lyndra poked an accusing finger through her cage wire. "You're no better than she is, Hothouse whore! The handlers say jump and you jump. No wonder they never whip you, you're the perfect slave already. But not me. I am a puregene. I am an Avant, dammit. I will submit to no man. They will never break me! Never!"

Lyndra began her familiar evening rant. Cattleya turned away. She curled into a fetal position, with her back to Lyndra, to hide how much Lyndra's words had hurt her. Cattleya wept silently.

You're the perfect slave already.

First Vance, now Lyndra. Everyone seemed to agree. Were they correct? Was this pointless, degrading life the most to which she could aspire?

No. Vance may have believed that at first, but he had changed his mind. And her Owner was not like Hellenia's. Lothario respected her and had tried to give her a life of dignity and usefulness. If she just survived this, he would rescue her. She had to hold on to that.

Still, the monotony and brutality of the daily "training" was wearing down her will. How much more of this could she endure before she became the automaton that Lyndra accused her of being, ready to blindly follow any order? In the end, would she be more like Lyndra, vowing never to submit, or like Hellenia, realizing that her true nature was to submit?

* * * * *

Another fortnight of training brought another foxhunt all too soon. This time they came for Lyndra.

Lyndra did not return to the pens for three days. When the handlers brought her back, she looked to have been roughly used. She would not tell Cattleya what had happened to her. The daily routine resumed for both women. Lyndra no longer disobeyed orders as she had before. Yet Maros, or often one of Maros' friends, especially one man in particular, named Adair, often came for her and demanded that she perform various tricks or sexual favors for them—and always for the camera as well.

Cattleya had now been trapped in the club for six weeks. Another foxhunt rolled around. She supposed it must be her turn now, but Gustaff arrived with Maros and Adair and pointed to Lyndra. The handlers yanked her from her cage.

"This foxhunt should be even better than last time." Gustaff rubbed his hands together. "This time, we'll be using the cockhounds instead of the bitches."

"No!" Lyndra cried. She threw herself at the feet of the two Avant men. She crawled before them, kissed their feet and whimpered. "Please, please, I'll do anything you say. Don't make me go through the hunt again. Make her do it! Please, Maros! You win. I'll do anything you want. I'll make the speech. I'll be your slave. I am your slave. Please..."

"Well, well," Maros said. "I'm glad to see you've come to your senses. Adair, as soon as I have my recording, the slave is yours. Did you hear that, Lyndra? Adair here is willing to marry you because he needs your money and your connections, but in reality, you'll be as much a slave as his demifem concubines."

"Yes, master." Lyndra kissed Adair's feet. Adair clipped a collar and leash around her neck. When Maros and Adair walked out of the barn, Lyndra crawled after them on her hands and knees.

Gustaff turned to look down his nose at Cattleya.

"Well, I guess that means you'll be our fox today."

* * * * *

First Hellenia. Then Lyndra. Broken.

What chance do I have? wondered Cattleya.

For the first time since she had been kidnapped, Cattleya left the compound. Armed handlers surrounded her in the robo-car that drove her out across the wild green fields of Steeplechase Park.

The handlers didn't think much of her chances either. One ribbed the other.

"Get a whiff of this vixen. Like an open bottle of perfume. Even I could sniff her out. The cockhounds will be on her pussy in a lick." He laughed at his crude joke.

The men shoved her out of the car in the middle of the park, into a covert tangled with bushes.

"You have one hour head start," they warned her. "You can run. You can hide. In one hour, the hunt begins."

The car rolled away.

Cattleya stood in the copse of bushes and young trees, at a loss. They had not taught fox hunting at Blodeuwedd Seminary. Certainly not how to play the point of view of the fox. Perhaps, she hoped forlornly, her flowery scent might actually throw off the cockhounds?

Not likely.

On the other hand, she had no intention of giving up without a fight. She delved deeper into the thicket.

* * * * *

Cattleya ran.

She had managed to elude them all morning, but now, as the sun dipped down from its noon apex, she could hear the unmistakable baying of the hounds. Whenever she topped one of the rolling hills, she could see them too. A pack of man-things, with broad chests, straining thighs and the snouts and tails of hounds. Behind the hounds, the hunters followed. Each huntsman rode a single-person, two-wheeled chariot, pulled by four pony-girls. The huntsmen carried whips to drive their pony teams, but Cattleya knew the whips could be used to trap her as well if she came into their range.

From afar, she had already seen them run the other quarry, the demifem, to ground. The cockhounds had pulled the poor girl creature from the hole in the ground where

she'd tried to hide. The pack spread her out flat on her back and fell on her one after the other, pummeling between her thighs with their enormous cocks. The hunters, when they caught up, gathered in a circle to watch the ravishment and laugh. The vixen, despite the merry chase she had led the hunt upon, soon returned the ardor of the pack, however. She was, after all, a demifem. Not only did she take the entire pack one after another, but it seemed to cause her no harm, and moments after they freed her, she eagerly began to lap at their genitals and offer her ass to them for further penetration.

If only I were a demifem, Cattleya thought. If only I could never think beyond the pleasures of the moment.

For her, however, there would be no pleasure. Cattleya was still a virgin; her handlers had never even assigned her to "the saddle" lest they accidentally pierce her hymen. Her first time would have involved an element of pain even with a considerate lover. Those monsters would rip her open, perhaps even kill her.

The escapades of the pack with the vixen only whetted the appetite of the hunters for their final quarry. Cattleya. It was now only a matter of time before they had her. The cockhounds had harried her from the woods where she had hidden herself. Though she'd known it was a mistake to head to open ground, she'd had no choice. Now their longer legs, longer stride and longer endurance doomed her.

A snarl on her right caused her to scream. She caught her foot on a shrub and fell into the grass. The pack surrounded her.

Oh god. No!

She felt nothing beyond fear. The beast men towered over her, supremely masculine, yet howling and snapping like animals. Like them, Cattleya was naked. Their nakedness meant predation—hers, vulnerability. They shoved her onto her back, forced apart her arms and legs. She felt dog-like tongues rasp her breasts. The leader of the pack advanced upon her, slavering at the jaw and gripping his club-like cock in one paw.

A whistle pierced the air. The hounds jerked their heads into the air. They froze, even the alpha male.

The pony chariots caught up and encircled the pack. Cattleya recognized one of the ponies, a silver-bodied girl with a horn of gold. But Hellenia would not look at her.

The huntsmen looked cruel and splendid in their scarlet jackets. Even Gustaff, mounted on his chariot, did not look as gnarled and scraggly as he usually did. Ugly and evil, yes, but powerful in his role as Master of the Hunt. He called out to taunt Cattleya.

"Before the pack devours your cherry, I thought you might like to know the man who made all this possible, the man who told me where to find you, and, from his cut, paid me to train you and have you raped in front of him by these beasts for his pleasure."

This in itself came as a shock to Cattleya. Someone had paid Gustaff to kidnap her? Gustaff allowed her no time to assimilate this news before he pointed to another chariot coming abreast of his.

At first all Cattleya saw was his scarlet jacket, white shirt and broad chest. Then she noticed his dark hair, hard eyes, and harshly handsome face. Only then was she forced to acknowledge the scream of recognition pounding in her head.

No. No. No.

Not him. It could not be.

No. Yes. It was he.

Vance Gardener had betrayed her and sold her into slavery.

Chapter Nine

Just as Gustaff lifted his whistle to release the hounds, Vance touched the shoulder of the Master of the Hunt to stop him.

"I've changed my mind," Vance said. "I want to take her virginity myself, before the hounds gang rape her."

Gustaff did not like the change in plan, that was clear.

"The point of the foxhunt is to share the excitement of the kill," Gustaff said. "If you wanted to take her first, you should have done so yesterday when you arrived."

"Are you telling me I am not allowed to decree the fate of my own slave?" asked Vance. "That was not my understanding of our agreement."

Gustaff scowled. "Very well. I'll call off the hounds."

He blew the whistle and the pack of beast men reluctantly withdrew from the vicinity of their prey. Vance dismounted his chariot to walk to Cattleya.

She scrambled to her feet before he could help her up.

"You!" She blazed with loathing. "I would rather be taken by the pack than by you!"

She launched an attack at him. Vance responded automatically to defend himself. Her training had been thorough. If she had not been exhausted from running all morning, naked compared to his armor, and innocent of the dirty tricks he had picked up through street fighting, the duel would have lasted much longer. As it was, he overpowered her in a few moves and forced her to her knees at his feet, with her arms pinioned behind her back. Her breasts heaved with sweat and exertion.

Vance tossed her over his shoulder. He remounted his chariot. Cattleya kicked and squirmed. When she managed to nearly buck from his arms, he responded by laying his riding crop across her *derrière*.

Gustaff and the other hunters laughed.

"Perhaps this is more amusing after all," said Gustaff with an appreciative leer at the hot purpling lash across Cattleya's upturned buttocks. "We've been going too easy on this one. It will be satisfying to finally see her broken in by a master."

* * * * *

That night, for the first time, Cattleya served with the other slave girls in the banquet hall. No one trusted her to carry platters from the kitchen, so she had been chained to Vance's table from the first. Now she knelt at his feet while he ate.

He laughed and jested with the other men at his table. Though they were all Avants, Vance appeared to have no trouble sharing their talk of sports and investments and interstellar politics. He never included Cattleya in the conversation. Occasionally, he pet her hair, as if she were a spaniel. When he addressed her at all, it was to give her orders, "Kneel. Lie down. Beg."

He had kept his riding crop, and when she did not obey, he swished her behind or her thighs with it.

Cattleya had been taught the "tricks" of the table during her "training". To beg, she had to crouch at his feet with her mouth open and her hands behind her back. If he wished, he would then drop a morsel of food between her lips or let her lap with her tongue out of his wine chalice.

She wanted to blank her mind. Let this debasement wash over her without touching her, while she kept her true self apart and aloft from how the horrid men at the table wished to see her. Still, she could not help but compare this dinner to her first dinner with Vance. They had spoken for hours on much deeper topics than the shallow banter of the Avant men. Did Vance really prefer having her at his feet like a pet, silent and humiliated, than as a companion and an equal? Did he really prefer the transparent boasting of his present compadres to the philosophical and personal discussion the two of them had shared that night?

Perhaps this was exactly what he wanted of her all along. If so, she should not mourn his betrayal. The man she had thought she had known had not betrayed her trust, for that man had never even existed, except in her imagination.

* * * * *

It was all Vance could do to restrain himself from throttling his dinner companions. He had interacted with the Avant class before. It was one of his talents that he could move with ease in any class of company and convince them that he was one of their own. Avants, on the whole, he found more contemptible than many a gang leader and pirate, but this bunch was even worse than the usual type. Boorish, braggart and arrogant, each man strove to outdo his companions with his claims of sporting prowess, financial acumen and, most especially, sexual conquests.

Each man had a girl chained at his feet, as Vance did. Tonight, the bitch babes sat under the tables while the pony girls served the platters of food from the kitchen. The tables were simple wood, not computerized service tables. The men competed in thinking up commands for their slave girls to fulfill. To keep up appearances, Vance had to imitate them to some degree with Cattleya, although he only gave her a minimum of orders. He avoided demanding that she lick his feet, or fellatio him here in public, or display her cunt for the fondling of his dinner companions.

The other men felt no restraint. As dinner neared satiation, and the wine flowed more freely in their veins, they gave more and more outrageous and explicit commands. One of them, a fat, slobbering pig of a man, ordered his bitch babe to lie back on the

table with her legs spread. He grabbed a passing pony girl and ordered her to lick the spread pussy. Both girls complied without complaint. While the pony girl bent over between the legs of the bitch babe, lapping at her clit, the fat man unhitched his pants. His penis, which Vance suspected had been rather small by nature, had been enhanced by cyber implants to turn it into a glowing, whirring monster of flesh and metal. He inserted his enhanced cock under the swishing horse tail of the pony girl and rammed her as hard as he could.

"I love the feel of a pony girl's tail on my balls as I fuck her," the fat man confided to Vance as he pumped the slave girl. Face flushed, he pulled out before he shot his load, and indicated the bare ass. "Go ahead. Take her for a ride."

All the men watched Vance. He stiffened. Was this some sort of a test? Did they suspect he was not one of them? Then the fat man's eyes darted downward—just for a second, but that was enough—to where Cattleya knelt on the floor.

Suddenly, Vance understood the hunger in the other men's eyes. They were members of this club. They could fuck the pony girls and bitch babes every night if they wanted to. But Cattleya, whose enticing scent had tantalized them all through dinner, was new and different. Kneeling on the floor, with her dark purple hair falling like a translucent veil over her bare, lavender skin and exotic nipples and pubis, she embodied desirability, femininity and inaccessibility. They all wanted to pierce those petals around her cunt and taste the nectar that glistened on her breasts. They thought that if they offered their own wenches to Vance, he would feel obligated to share Cattleya with them in turn.

Damn them all to hell.

"Thank you, but I think I'll be retiring to my chambers for the night," Vance said.

"Master of the Hunt!" The fat man waved down Gustaff, who sat at another table. "What say you to this matter? For weeks now, we've heard rumors of the strange, purple-skinned orchid girl. After the hunt, we were not allowed to participate in the kill or even see the quarry blooded. Are we to be deprived once again? After waiting patiently all this time, are we not entitled to a taste of her charms?"

Blooded—it was how the huntsmen referred to the taking of a girl's virginity. They used the term the kill to refer to the gang rape at the end of the hunt.

"You know the rules," Gustaff replied. "A club member may dispose of his property as he pleases. If he wishes to blood her himself in his own room, he may. Still." Gustaff let menace creep into his words. "While no rule of our brotherhood demands it, a club member who wishes to act in the spirit of fraternity would not deny his fellows their share of the fun. Especially a new member who wished to prove himself a huntsman of good sportsmanship. So I agree. I think some small display of her charms is in order."

Damn them.

Vance had to hide his clenched fists. What should he do? Gustaff had made it clear that taking Cattleya away from the prying eyes of the rest of the club was not an option.

On the other hand, considering the impact that Cattleya had on men, Vance feared that any “display”, no matter how “small”, of her charms would drive these boars into a rutting heat. He was also acutely aware of Cattleya herself. She did not move from her knees, but though she kept herself as still as possible, he could feel the tension rolling off her body. She did not want to be displayed like a toy.

He had no choice, unfortunately. He had to give Gustaff and his goons something. He had to give Cattleya a command.

“Slave,” he barked at her.

She jerked up her head and met his eyes. Defiance shone in her face, as well as hatred. He was glad. He preferred her hate to her tears.

“Stand on the table.”

The fat man rubbed his hands together in glee. He quickly ordered the bitch babe and the pony girl out of the way. The pony girl also removed the last of the dishes, so that Cattleya had a wide, wooden surface clear of any obstructions. A chain still bound her ankle to the table’s leg, but that did not stop her from stepping onto the tabletop.

By now, every man in the room watched them in breathless anticipation. What would the newcomer order his pretty purple slave to do?

Even nude and shackled, Cattleya’s dignity did not diminish. From her regal yet modest carriage, she might have been an Earth imperial princess, gowned in gold, upon a podium to address her subjects, rather than a slave girl forced to exhibit herself to a crowd of lewd men. She held her chin high and stared at a point above the heads and comprehension of her leering audience.

“Dance,” he commanded her.

For a moment, she did not move. Vance feared that if she defied him openly, he would have to make a show of whipping her, or lose all credibility in his role. To his relief, however, she took a deep breath and began to dance.

The men loosed applause of catcalls and obscene cheers. For several minutes into her dance, they called out a ribald commentary on her attributes. More and more voices fell silent, however, as her dance continued. Jaws dropped and eyes bugged. Jaded and spoiled though these men were, most had never seen a woman of Cattleya’s skill dance such a dance as this.

She had no music, no props, no lights, no costumes. She had only herself, her body and her beauty and her talent. Her belly undulated, her hips rocked. Her hair swayed and swirled around her like a veil. Her hands fluttered about her like two graceful doves. No one would have guessed that her stage was small, for the way she filled it with her steps, it seemed as though it were the perfect size for her kicks and twirls.

At the height of her dance, Vance unlocked the chain around the table leg and held it in his hands. Then he opened his arms to her, and Cattleya jumped into his embrace. He held her cradled in his arms. She hid her face against his chest, and he could feel the pants from her exertion tickle his chest hair under his thin white hunter’s blouse.

"And now," he said to Gustaff in a tone that would brook no further delay, "I want my slave prepared for me in a private chamber."

* * * * *

Red velvet drapes hung from the four-post bed, chains hung from the ceiling and whips hung from hooks on the walls. It was a typical bedchamber at the club. Handlers suspended Cattleya from the chains. Ankle cuffs in the ground kept her legs spread as far apart as her arms.

Vance stood and watched the servants chain her up. He had his arms crossed and a dark fire burned in his eyes. Neither of them said a word, even long after the handlers left the room.

Finally, Cattleya could bear it no longer. Rape she had expected for six weeks now. It was not what Vance would do to her body that filled her with grief and loathing. It was the sting of his betrayal. No matter what she had tried to tell herself at dinner, she kept returning to the wound his presence inflicted. That it should be he, of all men, who had arranged for her to be kidnapped, raped and broken...this hurt beyond understanding.

"Why did you do it, Mr. Gardener?" Cattleya asked. "Is it that you couldn't stand to see me happy, with a fine career, a house of my own, living independently? Was it so important to you to put me in my place and reduce me to being nothing but a whore? Or was it jealousy? I turned down your offer to leave with you out of loyalty to my Owner. Lothario proved everything I had dreamed about and more; he gave me my freedom as a prelude to his love. But you couldn't stand that, could you? If you couldn't have me for yourself, you didn't want anyone to have me. You couldn't afford to buy me and didn't want to free me, so you stole me instead. Is that it?"

"Your precious Lothario is a fool," he said harshly.

"I wouldn't expect a man like you to understand a real gentleman."

He launched himself from his corner, and Cattleya, conditioned by six weeks of cruelty and punishments, cringed. She silently cursed herself for forgetting her own rules. She would not be like Hellenia or Lyndra, outwardly defiant but inwardly weak. Her strategy would be just the opposite. She would be silent and compliant in all things, hiding her true self within where no one could find it to destroy it. Unfortunately, with Vance, it was hard to remember to do that. Now he would beat her for talking back to him. Or do something worse.

She did not realize she had bowed her head and shut her eyes until his hand cupped her chin.

"God, Cattleya. What have they done to you? Why do you flinch from me?"

"Aren't you going to punish me for defying you? It's how they broke Hellenia and Lyndra."

"Who?"

"Two other women who were here. Men they knew paid the club to break their wills, just as you paid to have the club kidnap me."

His mouth tightened. Despite his obvious anger, his thumb brushed her cheek gently.

"I'm going to take your virginity tonight, Cattleya," he said.

She shivered. "I know."

"If I do, you will hate me for the rest of your life, won't you?"

"Yes, Vance."

"You're afraid it will ruin you for Lothario Royant-Bor. But, Cattleya, if the man really loves you, he'll love you, not your virginity. He won't blame you for what was done to you against your will."

The soft solace in Vance's voice jarred with the sexual abasement he threatened. Tears escaped down her cheeks. How could he do such terrible things to her and yet make it so hard to hate him?

"You have no right to even speak his name."

"Then neither of us will mention him again," said Vance in a husky whisper. "Only your name will cross my lips. Cattleya. Cattleya. Cattleya..."

His arms encircled her and he breathed her name against the arch of her throat. He blew against the nape of her neck, under her hair, behind her ear. That sweet breeze of a caress, lighter than any touch, ignited a tingling that traversed her bare skin like a prairie fire.

"Cattleya. Cattleya. Cattleya..." Feather kisses tickled the name on her heated skin.

She moaned into his chest.

No, she could not let him trick her with tenderness. Better the beasts than this torment. His every touch was a lie that promised he cared when all he really wanted was to prove his superiority over her. At least Gustaff did not hide his contempt or his goal.

"Cattleya," he murmured. "Cattleya, how I've missed you."

"No," she said. Then, louder, "No!"

Vance stepped back from her. His burning eyes raked her naked body. Cattleya fought the impulse to blush and turn away from his scrutiny. By now, she should be used to being splayed naked for Vance to peruse, but each time she felt her helplessness anew, both exposed and elated. She hated him, she reminded herself. Yet a part of her rebelliously rejoiced that he had rescued her from the pack of cockhounds and claimed her for himself.

She feared him, though not with the bone-deep terror of physical pain or death that she feared the cockhounds. Vance represented a subtler threat. The cockhounds could only have brutalized her body. Vance could make her body betray her, even as he had betrayed her.

As always, he took her by surprise. He unchained her feet and then her hands. She stood still, staring at him uncertainly. Her glance slid to the door of the bedchamber.

A dark smile cracked the edge of his mouth. "Do you think there is any chance to leave this room unnoticed tonight? The halls are filled with other guests enjoying the pleasures of the bitches and ponies. The guards and handlers are nearby to help in case any of the demifems panics and tries to run from too violent a master.

"Not to mention, Gustaff is still unhappy with my decision not to take you and share you publicly, in the park or in the banquet hall. If he thinks I can't control you, he will be glad to find volunteers to 'assist' me. If you leave this room, you will lose your virginity just as if you stay, but it will be to strangers. Is that what you want?"

"I'd rather be raped by strangers than by you."

Her breasts heaved as she spoke. It wasn't true. She wanted him, and only him. The thought of any other hands on her body repulsed her, but she knew that the feel of his hands on her would undo her. Then she would be truly defenseless.

His face hardened. "Go then."

He wouldn't let her leave, Cattleya was sure of it. She walked to the door. She looked at him. His face told her nothing; it had turned to stone. She put her hand on the doorknob. Would he see how far she would go, just to let her accumulate crimes for which he could punish her?

She opened the door. Still, Vance did not stop her.

Cattleya stepped into the hall and closed the door behind her. Her heart thumped wildly. Would he really let her walk away? Could she escape him and this hell at the same time? She hadn't a stitch of clothing on, but she had become accustomed to that. It would only be a problem outside the club, if she could make it that far.

The thick carpet in the hallway softened her footfalls. She had progressed halfway down the hall when one of the many doorways along each side opened. A drunk stumbled out. Cattleya recognized him as the fat man who had been sitting at their table, the one who had goaded Vance into ordering her to dance.

"Well, well," he chortled. He grabbed her arm. "Was your master not man enough for you? You decided to come to me instead."

He tried to pull her toward him, to slobber her with something he might have thought of as a kiss. Cattleya employed a martial arts move on him that knocked him unconscious. Unfortunately, his heavy body made a loud thud as it hit the floor. The demifems he had in the chamber behind him began to squeal in alarm. The bitch babe in particular raised a racket with her barking and howls. Other doors along the hallway began to open.

"It's the purple girl!" another man cried, emerging into the hall. A half dozen men poured out into the hall and advanced on her from both ends of the hallway. The closest lunged for her. She dropped him to the floor just as she had knocked out the fat man. This stirred up the outrage of the others, who flew at her like angry wasps and shouted for the guards.

Cattleya realized she could not fight her way through all of them, especially once the guards showed up. She ran back into the chamber she shared with Vance.

At once, he stepped between her and the angry crowd of men.

"Are you having some problem with your slave, newcomer?" one of the men demanded.

Vance looked at him coolly. "Not at all."

"Then why is she in the hall, knocking people out?"

Vance lifted a brow. "Are you afraid of a demifem?"

The men shuffled their feet and glared at Vance.

"She was defiant. She must be punished!" one shouted.

"Naturally." Vance smiled. He lifted his hand to show them he clutched a heavy whip.

The men grumbled but accepted this. No one wanted to admit to having been intimidated by a petite slave girl, nor did they wish to interfere with a master's strange games with his pet. They dispersed back to their own rooms, and Vance shut the door behind him.

Cattleya stared at the whip. She had been beaten during her training at the hunting club, but never with such a thick whip. Her petal soft skin bruised easily, and her keepers had not wanted visible damage upon her flesh, so they had used less abrasive instruments of punishment. This one would draw blood.

"You came back," said Vance.

"You knew I had no choice."

"Yes," he said. "As I have no choice for what I do now."

The blood drained from her face. He really meant to go through with it. He planned to whip her. Yet she had chosen to come back to him rather than suffer the strangers in the hall. Had she reached the same point as Hellenia and Lyndra, where she would accept anything out of love for a master?

No. She would not obey because she believed in her heart that she belonged to Vance. She would obey because she had been taught to submit to authority, and she had learned how to do so without giving away the secret dreams in her heart. Once she had made the mistake of sharing some of those dreams with this man. But that had been when she thought he preferred her to dine at the table with him, not beneath him. Though he might keep her naked and collared the rest of her life, she would never expose her true self to him again.

In training, they had taught her the position to assume for a whipping. Cattleya went to the bed and spread her legs. She bent over and gripped the bedpost. She didn't know if she could endure the blows without chains to hold her in place, but she preferred not to be bound if she could help it. She knew that without a gag, she would soon be screaming and begging like a child. Perhaps that was what he wanted to hear.

She heard his footsteps behind her. She could see his shadow, and the shadow of the whip coiled in his hand. Then the whip disappeared from her view. She braced herself for the first blow.

He was cruel. He made her wait. Did he know that waiting was the hardest part? And awaiting the first blow was the hardest of all. Her buttocks jutted toward him, woefully assailable.

"Cattleya," he said softly. "What are you doing?"

She squeezed her eyes shut. How she tired of the games.

"Please," she whispered. "Please, Vance, just get it over with."

Something touched her lower cheek, but it was not the sting of the lash. He caressed her ass. She felt both his hands, which meant that the shadow of the whip had disappeared because he had put it aside, not because he'd uncoiled it. His hands moved to her shoulders and pulled her up to a stand. She stood stiffly, face away from him, wondering what he wanted.

He shifted her hair and breathed against her neck.

"Cattleya."

"No," she whimpered. How could he melt her with one breath, one word?

"You came back to me. Now surrender to me."

She forced herself not to lean back into him.

"You have my body at your disposal. You can do with me as you will."

"I don't want just your body." His hands reached around her to cup her breasts. His breath felt hot against her back. "I want all of you."

"Never."

"You don't have to love me," he said. "Hate me. But don't shut me out. Open yourself to me. Hate me with your whole soul if you must, but show me your soul. And then say that you'll give yourself to me willingly."

He kissed her up and down her spine while his hands massaged her breasts. She began to weep. He turned her body around and caught her tears on his tongue.

"I do hate you," she sobbed. "I do."

He captured her mouth in his. He kissed her fiercely and she kissed him back. She could not fight him any longer. Her whole body cried for his touch.

"I surrender, Vance," she said. "I give myself to you."

"Willingly?"

"Willingly. But I hate you all the more for it."

"I know," he said, and lifted her into the bed.

Chapter Ten

Vance stretched her out on the scarlet bedcovers. He still wore his hunting attire, including a jacket of the same shade of red. He removed this. Underneath he had on a snowy white shirt and tight black pants and boots. Cattleya couldn't help but admire how rugged and dashing he looked in the outfit. He unbuttoned the shirt slowly. When he shrugged out of it, she drew in a breath. As handsome as he looked dressed, it couldn't compare with how good he looked undressed. His chest rippled with muscles. He stepped out of the boots and pants next. His thighs matched his chest in the hard perfection of each sinew. And between the two regions....

She had seen his cock before. But she had never seen all of him like this, gloriously naked and erect, standing above her like a god from a poet's fever. The memory of the taste of his sex in her mouth made her flush and long to taste him again. She licked her lips. His cock hardened as he watched her, as if it knew her desire and yearned to quench her thirst with its salty cream.

She drew herself to him, feet tucked beneath her, that she might take his cock in her hand. It jumped at her touch like a captured bird.

"Cattleya..." Deep and husky now, he caressed her name.

She petted him, marveling at the texture of his skin, the paradoxical softness and hardness of him. She stroked him with both hands and puckered her mouth around his tip. A glint of pre-cum greeted her with the salty flavor she desired. She lolled her tongue in circles until he throbbed for her.

"No." He disengaged her. "Tonight, I pleasure you."

He captured her hands and lifted them over her head then pressed her back against the bed. He lowered himself on top of her, so that the concave and convex planes of their bodies met and matched. He smiled at her, the most dulcet of smiles, like a groom to his new bride, or a worshipper to his priestess, and canted,

*And breast to breast, and knee to knee,
Tremulous, breathless, swaying, burning,
Body to beautiful body yearning,
In joy and terror, flesh to flesh,
They flamed in passion's fine red mesh –
Living in one short breath again
The cosmic tide's whole bliss and pain...*

Her eyes widened. Poetry? Her heart clenched. It reminded her of their dinner together in the Seminary. Did he think by that he could erase the humiliation of the banquet? When he looked at her like that, she almost believed he could.

"I do not know the poem or poet," she said.

"Conrad Aiken. 'The Dance of Life'. 1916."

He nudged her over onto her belly with her arms still stretched over her head. The twist left her dark hair splayed across the pillow. Cattleya did not like this position. The ponies and bitches offered their rears to their masters, to emphasize the animalistic nature of the demifem. There was another reason a girl might be asked to display her buttocks as well. After her weeks at the club, Cattleya had come to associate the position with being beaten. He had put the whip down, but...

He traced the faint marks of previous punishments across her back and buttocks. The most recent was the lashes he himself had given her after the hunt. His blows from dinner had been too light to make an impact, even on her fragile skin, which recorded every indignity with a deep purpling in the pale lilac.

"They hurt you," he said.

"Not as much as Hellenia and Lyndra. But I retain the bruises longer."

"My delicate flower. You were meant to be cherished, not chastised."

"I was created to be used as my Owner saw fit," she said bitterly. "No different than the demifems."

"Shhhh." He hummed into her neck. "Let me tell you a secret. I am not who I pretend to be."

"What?" She tried to turn around. The mild pressure of his hand on her back would not allow her up.

"I am a royal prince of Earth," he said. She heard the laughter in his voice, and she realized he was play-acting a fantasy. "That makes you, my beautiful lady, my chosen princess. And though vile villains may surround us on all sides, we have evaded them for this one night. It is long enough for me to claim you as a royal groom would claim his princess bride."

"No prince of Earth would be allowed to marry a transgenic," Cattleya said cynically.

"Then we will run away together and found a new world beyond the edge of known space. There we will both be gardeners, and plant a garden planet all our own."

She shut her eyes against the lure of his fantasy. She hated him for weaving the beautiful dream, a dream that could never be. Better the whip than this.

"Vance, don't," she begged. "Don't taunt me."

"Surrender your imagination for one night." His hands moved over her back, kneading and knuckling her tense muscles. She sighed into the pillow. He massaged her shoulders and moved systematically down her spine. He avoided bruised areas and attended to knotted muscles with special care. He massaged her buttocks and continued

down her thighs and calves. Her legs were still sore from the hunt. As he kneaded the aching flesh, she relived the terrible chase and began to tense up again, but he patiently renewed his ministrations until both memory and tension drained away from her. She fell into dreamy lassitude. She had a vision of him in gilded finery as a Prince of Earth, holding his hand out to her to join him on the dais of a grand throne room. She smiled at the fancy.

Once he had massaged her into a liquid state of relaxation, he retraced the path his hands had just beguiled, this time with his breath. He blew on her tingling flesh. And, too, he breathed her in and sniffed deep draughts of her scent up and along the curves of her body.

"I will perfume all my skin that I may attract lovers," he murmured against her skin, and she knew he quoted something though she did not recognize the poem. "Upon my beautiful legs, in a basin of silver, I will pour the spikenard of Tarsos, and the metopion of Egypt."

He nipped the base of her head with his teeth then turned her over on her back. He kissed her forehead, her eyes, her cheeks, her mouth, her throat. For a moment, lifted up on his arms, which straddled her, he gazed at her with such intensity that her breath caught. Then he lowered himself along her body and his mouth and his hands rendezvoused at her breasts.

Two hands and a mouth to a breast, the hands to massage and rub spirals around the flesh, the tongue and lips to curl around the nipple and tease and suck. Relentlessly, he milked her of the golden honey that her aroused nipples secreted. And when the first drop met his tongue, his whole body rumbled against her with his fierce growl of pleasure. He suckled upon each breast until her desire pooled between her legs and she wriggled beneath him in abandon.

She spread her legs, silently begging him to continue his descent down her body. He grinned at her wickedly and lowered his head between her thighs.

He milked her pussy of the nectar of her desire as he had milked her breasts. His tongue roughed each petal around her cleft. He rubbed along the grain of the petaled flesh and then counter to it, up and down the length of the slit. Then his hands spread her purple lips wide and his tongue whirled circles around her nub. He kept her thighs from clenching down on his head with his elbows. She bucked wildly and came in a flurry of cries. He let her settle back onto the coverlets in exhaustion for only a moment before he took her clit between his teeth and worried it delicately. She climaxed again, more slowly and deeply this time, too overwhelmed with the pleasure enveloping her to release the silent scream that vibrated through her body.

All her muscles had bunched during her climax. Release this time rendered her utterly limp. She could not think. She could only stare, dazed with the afterglow of ecstasy, at Vance as he lashed her arms and legs to the corners of the bed. Then she blinked, and, too late, began to thrash against the straps.

"What are you doing?"

"Your creators designed you with a damn tight cherry," he said. "There's no way I can take you naturally without causing you pain."

Did that mean that he planned to take her unnaturally? Cattleya did not like the sound of that.

"What are you going to do?"

He left her tied to the bed without answering. From his clothes nearby, he retrieved the smallest of his many guns. It was a stunner.

"Vance, no." Cattleya struggled against the straps. "I want to remain conscious."

"You'll be conscious," he said.

He positioned himself between her legs, gun in hand.

Fear tensed her. "Don't."

"It's not what you think, Cattleya." He looked at her with that unbearably tender gaze. "You agreed to surrender to me. Trust me."

She tried to hide her shaking but could not.

He unwound the cylindrical muzzle of the stunner. "This section can also be used as an anesthetic in an emergency first aid situation," he explained. "It works on the same principle as the stunner, using quantized fields to interact with the nervous system, but at much lower levels of energy."

He inserted the cylinder into the cleft between her legs. It felt cold, hard and smooth—until Vance twisted the end. Then Cattleya saw a brief flash of light and felt a heat between her legs. Both sensations lasted only a fraction of a second. Vance withdrew the cylinder. She could no longer feel anything below her waist.

"How do you feel?" Vance asked her.

"Strange. Numb."

"That will pass. It's the anesthetic. I just vaporized your hymen, but you couldn't feel it. What comes next may also feel strange, but it won't hurt you."

"What comes...?"

Then she felt it. Sensation returned in tendrils below her waist. As feeling returned to each sliver of flesh, she felt awareness of that area double, triple in intensity, almost like a caress. The weird, disembodied strokes coursed up her legs and down her belly until the strokes converged between her legs. When sensation returned to her cunt and her clit, the phenomenon overwhelmed her.

"Oh god. Oh god, Vance!" she cried. She could not control her body. Her hips arched off the bed and her whole torso flapped against the bed in wild undulations. If she had not been tied to the bed, she would have curled into a ball, or rolled off it, or hurt herself in her thrashing. She would have tried to put her hands between her legs to try to hurry along the unbearable torment of teasing. As it was, she could only endure wave upon wave of doubling awareness, convulsed in an orgasm that lasted endless minutes.

Her orgasm faded to a plateau, but just then the feeling returned inside, where Vance had inserted the cylinder. It might not have been as sensitive as her clit, except that Vance timed it to choose that moment to plunge his own hard rod of flesh into her sheath. The heightened responsiveness reacted to the friction of his entry with a burst of pleasure that increased with each stroke he plied.

At some point when she'd been too oblivious with orgasm to notice, Vance had unlashed her wrists and ankles from the bed. She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around the small of his back. He delved her with deep, forceful strokes that rubbed his body against her clit as he moved. The nub, already so thoroughly awakened by previous excitement, could not long resist this treatment without again bringing Cattleya to clitoral climax. At the same time, she could feel another, subtler sensation building inside.

"Cattleya!"

When Vance spoke her name, hoarse with his own impending climax, she felt all her muscles clench again, including her pussy around his cock. Their cries mingled as his seed implanted her womb.

They cuddled long after he withdrew, bare flesh to bare flesh, beige against lilac.

Vance kissed her on her lips. He murmured sleepily, "O then each breath tasted sweeter... For the one I love most lay sleeping by me, under the same cover in the cool night."

She knew this poem. Walt Whitman, 1860, "When I Heard At The Close of the Day". She nuzzled closer to him and completed the stanza. "In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams, his face was inclined toward me. And his arm lay lightly around my breast, and that night I was happy."

* * * * *

Cattleya awakened in the crimson bed. Vance slept beside her. A drowsy delirium of pleasure hazed her mind at first, memories of their lovemaking. Then she focused on the lurid room around her and reality shattered her blissful mood. Vance had seduced her into a dream, but it was only a cruel illusion. She had to remember that he was the last man in the universe she dared trust.

She slipped her hand beneath his pillow and pulled out the gun she had known she would find there.

His eyes did not open, but his fist snapped closed around her wrist. He opened his eyes to meet hers.

"Cattleya." He lifted an eyebrow. "Planning to shoot someone?"

She didn't answer. He had caught her. What would be the point?

He released her hand. "Go ahead," he said. "Kill me if that's what you want to do. But we would probably have a better chance of escaping this place if we leave together."

Cattleya lifted the gun. Did Vance believe she could kill him? She knew better. Her hatred for him was too tangled with other emotions she didn't dare analyze. Nor did she believe she could escape the club. Her only hope was to die trying. She owed Lothario that much.

"Leave together?" she repeated his last sentence blankly. It took her a moment to realize what he implied. "Escape? As you helped me 'escape' last night when I tried to leave?"

"I told you that you wouldn't get far last night. Too many people were still awake."

"Why would you help me escape after you paid for me to be brought here?"

"I didn't. A man named Horace Sharo-Royant paid Gustaff to capture you." Vance spoke in a low voice almost into the pillow, as if he wanted to keep his statement confidential from any sensors in the room. "I took his place."

Cattleya stared at him. She could well believe that of Horace Sharo-Royant, that horrid rat of a man who had pinched her and leered at her so often at work. She wanted to believe it. Maybe too much.

If Vance had helped her to escape last night, or if he had at least told her this then, she would have believed him. Instead, he had taken what he wanted from her. Oh yes, she had given in to him willingly enough. Wasn't that the point he had brought her here to make, that she could not resist him? But the fact remained that he had ravished her, body and soul, demanding and receiving her surrender. After enslaving her so completely, how could he now blithely claim he had come to save her?

"Cattleya," he said urgently, for he must have sensed her scorn, "you know I couldn't have been the one who paid off Gustaff. Even had I wanted to, this is an Avant club. I don't have the feeb to shake in these circles."

That was hardly a romantic argument, but it did have certain logic. Cattleya still didn't trust him. She had trusted him once, and he had betrayed her. Never again would she place her hopes in Vance Gardener.

And yet, she handed the gun back to him and looked at him half in challenge, half in inquiry.

"Do you have a plan to get us out of here?" she asked.

"The best time to leave is now, when the rest of the guests are still sleeping off their hangovers."

* * * * *

Did Cattleya believe what he had told her about Horace Sharo-Royant? Vance couldn't tell. Cattleya accompanied him as they crept from the bedroom and out of the decadent mansion where the club's guests enjoyed their nights with the slave girls. Yet Vance sensed that Cattleya did not trust him. Whatever fragile friendship they had once shared had been shattered by the physical intimacy they had shared last night. As sweet

as the feel of her body under his had been, Vance regretted the trade. He knew though, that had he to make the same choices again now, he would not do otherwise.

He did not believe that he would escape this club alive. If not, Cattleya would be left in the clutches of sadists and rapists. But no matter what else they did to her after this, at least he had seen to it that her first time had been as gentle and pleasurable as he could make it, not a gang rape under the paws of beasts.

The two of them padded silently through plush hallways empty of guests or guards. Vance wore his black riding pants and white shirt. Cattleya wore his flared crimson jacket belted about the waist, as if it were a dress. The red contrasted garishly with her purple coloring. She would make an easy target, but so far no one had intercepted them. Vance began to second-guess his own pessimism. After all, Gustaff had shown no signs of recognizing him, or suspecting him of being anyone other than Horace Sharo-Royant. Perhaps the two of them could just walk out of here after all? Only the main hall remained below them, down a marble staircase, and it lay still curtained in darkness, undisturbed.

No such luck.

"I'm afraid that's as far as I can allow you to go with my property, Mr. Gardener," a cold voice rang out. The lights flared to brilliance in the hall.

Gustaff stood there, along with a coterie of his thugs, and a man whom Vance recognized because Vance had knocked him unconscious and robbed him of his credit chit and ID stick. Horace Sharo-Royant.

Cattleya gasped in recognition.

"You lied to me, Mr. Gardener," Gustaff said. "You posed as an Avant of some means. It appears, however, that you are neither highly placed nor wealthy. You will find that lack quite fatal in this establishment."

Vance put an arm around Cattleya. Behind her back, out of sight of Gustaff and company, he pressed a second gun into her hand.

"Just aim it the best you can," he said. "If we get separated, go on without me."

The guards trotted up the marble stair.

"Now!" shouted Vance. He took his first shot as the order left his mouth. Cattleya followed his example a fraction of a second later.

They mowed down guards. Vance barreled a path down the steps with his body and Cattleya dashed behind in his wake. Only a few guards remained conscious to return fire, but they weren't the only ones Vance and Cattleya had to worry about. Automatic weapons unfolded out of the walls and pelted them with blasts as well. In addition, Gustaff barked into his implant to summon more guards to the mansion.

Vance blasted a shot through a large window. "Jump!"

They leaped through the shattered glass. The landing jarred Cattleya, but fortunately, the soft turf cushioned the landing. The two took off across the lawn.

* * * * *

Howls rent the air, followed by barking.

The cockhounds!

Fear bolted through Cattleya. She felt as though she were trapped in the hunt all over again. Her sore legs would not carry her far a second day in a row. More than that, though, she had tired of cringing and fleeing from her enemies.

She stopped in her tracks.

"Cattleya?"

"I won't run anymore, Vance." She looked at him, wondering if he could understand. "I won't go back either."

He nodded. He did understand. "We stand and fight then."

"No surrender. I won't let them take me alive."

"No surrender," he said gravely.

They stood back to back and awaited the onslaught of their foes.

* * * * *

The pack of man-hounds rushed them from all sides. Vance had a gun in each hand. Cattleya had his third gun. He could not watch her without lowering his own guard, but he knew from the animal yowls of pain that she held her own. Nonetheless, some of the cockhounds took advantage of their superior numbers to race into hand-to-hand range, where their larger bulk and proximity rendered the guns useless.

One of the hounds knocked Cattleya's gun from her hand. It skittered across the lawn, out of her reach. Fortunately, the dog men lacked the intelligence or the training or both to know to pick it up and use it. Her opponent simply leaped for her throat. Struggling against two of the beast men himself, Vance could not rush to aid her. He caught only a glimpse of the uneven battle—a towering, seven-foot, toothy male-shaped monster against one petite purple maid. But when the two bodies met, Cattleya performed a martial arts move that sent the cockhound flying through the air with a yap of surprise.

Soon a circle of fallen opponents surrounded them. Between the two of them, they had laid low the entire pack.

By now, however, Gustaff and his guards formed a larger ring around them, this one backed by the glinting steel of high-power rifles.

"You will now have the price of healing my pack added to your bill!" Gustaff shouted at Vance. "I don't think money alone will suffice. I will carve the price out of your hide!"

Vance handed Cattleya his second gun.

"Don't be a fool, man," said Gustaff. "You cannot continue to fight. You are outgunned a hundred to one."

"There is one blast left in each weapon," Vance said in a low voice to Cattleya.

"Understood," she said. Her voice did not tremble. She added softly, "Thank you."

Suddenly, the ground heaved under their feet. Heat and light filled the air. Vance thought at first that Gustaff's men had opened fire, but no, the blast was too powerful for hand rifles, and it came from a higher angle.

A ship hovered in the air over the mansion. From its fore guns, laser blasts poured like molten lava. Gustaff and his men, the targets of the ship's wrath, dispersed faster than frightened rabbits before a hound.

The ship landed upon the lawn. A landing plank extended from its steel belly, and a man strolled casually down the plank. He wore a gold brocade jacket over melon hued pants and white boots. The early morning light glinted in his gold hair, forming a halo around his boyish, handsome face.

"Lothario!" Cattleya dropped Vance's gun and ran to the blond hero.

"My sweet, you are safe at last!" he cried as he accepted her into his arms.

Behind Lothario, a discreet platoon of cyborg soldiers waited at the top of the plank. Lothario issued them some command through his implant, and they trotted down the plank toward Vance.

They had his gun from him and his hands shackled behind his back so quickly and unexpectedly that Vance did not have time to fight.

"What the hell?" he demanded.

A cyborg punched him in the stomach. "You will not talk unless addressed, prisoner."

Cattleya noticed this development with alarm rather than gladness, it gratified Vance to see.

"Lothario?" she asked.

The golden man's face hardened. "Darling, after you were kidnapped, I hired that wretch to find you, never dreaming that he himself was the mastermind of your disappearance."

"He told me that he only took the place of a man named Horace Sharo-Royant, in order to rescue me."

"Then he lied. He used the account and identity of a man named Horace Sharo-Royant, true, which is how I traced him, but the entire plot was Gardener's from the start. He simply had no money to carry out his plan under his own name."

"No! That—" Vance began to shout, but he could not finish, *is a filthy lie* because one of the cyborgs immediately smashed his jaw. Vance spat blood in helpless fury.

"I'm afraid I have rather conclusive proof," Lothario said to Cattleya.

"I would like to go over it." Cattleya glanced back at Vance, and he could see the doubt in her eyes.

She did not trust him. How could she? But what about Lothario? Did the fop really think that Vance had masterminded Cattleya's kidnapping, or was there something more sinister afoot?

"You see," said Lothario, "he organized your kidnapping because he needed both the false identity and you. After he used you for his own pleasure, he intended to either sell you or hold you for ransom in order to pay off some old enemies from his past. However, I encountered them first. Isn't that right, Major?"

A familiar figure, the tall, redheaded Earth officer Major Quenten, strolled forward out of the shadows of the ship's interior. He wore his uniform, spiffy and stiff-lipped as ever.

"I'm afraid so," drawled Major Quenten.

"Fortunately for me, the good major here could not be bribed," said Lothario. "He came to me and proposed we join forces instead."

Vance met Quenten's eyes. Quenten's expression was inscrutable.

Cattleya's thoughts, on the other hand, were all too transparent. From the dismay and hurt in her face, it was obvious that this last piece of the puzzle convinced her of Vance's guilt.

"Don't worry," Lothario said. He patted Cattleya's hand. "There will be plenty of time for the trial and execution of that criminal after we have married."

Chapter Eleven

"My dear?" Lothario touched her hand. "You seem preoccupied."

"Forgive me." Cattleya twisted her hands in her lap. She wore a vivavestita of cream silk and pussywillow fluff. Lothario had showered her with presents ever since they had arrived at his palace. They brunchted together in one of the palace's many elegant rooms. "I still cannot believe that Mr. Gardener orchestrated the kidnapping. If he wanted me for himself, why send me to... that place?"

Lothario finished off a cream puff pastry and licked his fingers. "My sweet, I must ask you a question. Please do not fear to tell me the truth. I will not be angry, no matter what your answer."

Cattleya gripped her hands tightly together.

"When you were at the club, were you violated?" he asked.

She covered her face with her hands, unable to answer. Had she been violated? She had been treated like an animal, humiliated and beaten for six weeks. But Vance had claimed her before she could be gang raped by the pack of cockhounds or the other club members. As for what she had shared with Vance, even now, after seeing the proof that he had arranged for her incarceration, she could not regret or repent what she had done with him that night. That made her the lowest of the low, a woman who had knowingly and willingly betrayed the man to whom she owed everything.

"Dumpling? Answer me."

She began to cry. "Oh Lothario, I am so ashamed."

Though she hid her head in her hands, she peeked between her fingers at him. To her shock, he leaned forward, with a demonic light in his eyes and a strange, twisted smile at the edge of his mouth. She lifted her head to look him in the face and the bizarre expression was gone, replaced by guileless concern. Uneasily, Cattleya decided that her own guilty conscience must have imagined the first expression she had thought she'd seen.

Nonetheless, when he scooted next to her and put his arms around her to comfort her, she stiffened. He pressed his lips against hers. Though his youth and some of his boyish good looks could still be discerned, Lothario had plumped to pudgy since the last time she'd seen him. His kiss felt like uncooked dough shoved against her mouth. However, it was more than the ineptness of his hand groping under the bodice of her dress that sent an involuntary shudder down her back. She had an irrational feeling of something vile touching her, suffocating her.

She panicked. Without planning to, she pushed him away from her and leaped up from the couch. She stood staring at her betrothed, wide eyed, heart racing, bosom heaving.

A hand covered her mouth.

"Oh! Lothario, I'm sorry. I—" She blushed violet. She had no explanation for her action.

He shaped his face into a sympathetic form. Yet there was something reptilian about the flat, unblinking predation in the way he watched her.

"My sugar cake, I quite understand. You were raped and forced to enjoy it like a shameless whore. Now the touch of any man brings back those memories. It will take you time to learn to trust again. I will not hurry you."

Cattleya nodded warily.

"Thank you for being so understanding, Lothario," she said.

She wondered why she did not feel reassured, only uneasier than before.

And, why, oh why, knowing all she knew now, did she wish that Vance were here beside her?

* * * * *

The cyborgs stripped Vance of his weapons and clothing, gave him but a rag to wear over his loins in their place, and shoved him into a cell. Vance had plenty of company in his prison. An endless row of cages stretched in grids as far as the eye could see under the perpetual glare of hot, white ceiling lights. The floor was polished bright white, and the bars of the cages were transparent, so that at first, it was not obvious the denizens of this strange dungeon were caged at all. However, the seemingly fragile bars jolted anyone who touched them with a severe shock. The cages were real enough.

The majority of the prisoners were women. Transgenic, cyborg, perhaps, by what he could tell, even puregene, women of all types were represented. They had one thing in common. They exemplified the finest paragons of their sex in terms of youth, health and beauty. However, their spirits had been crushed. Most of them sat listlessly in their cages, insensate to the world.

Several hours after Vance had been incarcerated, the cyborg guards brought another male prisoner and prodded him into the cell next to Vance. The new prisoner was also naked except for a loincloth, and his back showed signs of whip marks and shock-stick burns. It took Vance a moment, therefore, to recognize the man.

"Major Quenten," Vance said, after he overcame his shock. Vance didn't bother to hide his contempt. "I take it your alliance with Royant-Bor was not quite the success you had hoped."

"Go to hell, Gardener," Quenten said. He sat in the center of his cell with his knees drawn up under his chin. He looked exhausted and beaten. "I've been Royant-Bor's

prisoner for months. His cyborg fleet captured my ship shortly after you and the girl escaped. Oh I didn't realize I was his prisoner at first. He proposed a bullshit alliance—his idea, not mine—but I admit I fell for it. He claimed you'd abducted the purple girl from him and that if we worked together, I could find you and he would find her. He made the scenario sound very...plausible. It was all lies, of course. He's a master liar. The day after he told me that, he went and met with both of you. But I didn't find that out until later."

"Is that why you agreed to that charade in front of Cattleya? When you knew damn well I never tried to bribe you?"

Quenten stared at Vance bleakly. "By then I knew Royant-Bor for what he was, but I had no choice, Gardener. He holds all my men hostage. He has...many ways of getting what he wants."

The emptiness in Quenten's voice gave Vance chills.

"I saw Lothario pick a redhead out of a crowd of men from a pool," Vance said carefully, embarrassed for the other man.

"You were here that day? I didn't see you..."

"It was you then?"

"Yes," Quenten said bitterly. "That's the day he chose me for his next 'project'. He took great delight in explaining exactly what he intended to do with my body."

"My god, Quenten," Vance blurted, "did he rape you?"

"What?" Quenten looked startled. "No."

"It's none of my business," Vance apologized. He wasn't sure if he believed Quenten or not, but he didn't want to humiliate the proud man any further.

"No, he doesn't take male lovers," said Quenten. "I wish that was all he wanted us for." He winced as he reconsidered. "Well, maybe not. Given how he treats his women. All those women—that's how he gets his kicks. But that's not what he collects healthy young men for. Our fate is different. Better or worse, I'm not sure."

"I don't understand."

"He's a handsome fellow, isn't he, our dear Avant?"

"I suppose. He seems to have let his exercise regime relax in the past few months though."

Quenten laughed in scorn. "Royant-Bor has never exercised or dieted in his life. He doesn't need to. He treats everything he owns the same way. He uses it and abuses it until it breaks. Then he buys a new one. He does it with his ships, with his women and with his bodies."

"His what?"

"You're the one who's so fond of living in the Anarchion, Gardener. You must know about it."

"Know about what? Quenten, stop dancing around what you're trying to say and just say it."

"You must know that some Avants extend their lives by having their brains transferred to new, youthful clones of themselves."

"Of course." It was one of the many disgusting customs allowed in the Anarchion that the rest of the civilized human galaxy found appalling.

"Well, some Avants don't bother with their own clones. Why should they? Lothario's natural looks are plain and inclined to acne and baldness. So he picks out the body he'd prefer to have instead. He collects specimens from slave markets all across the Anarchion. His pirate fleets kidnap others. He then chooses whichever body he fancies for the next year. By that time, he's engorged and debauched his previous body so badly that his real nature shows through—grotesque, obese and foul. But he doesn't care. He's just another brain transplant away from a fresh new face and healthy physique."

"I can't believe even the Avants would do that."

"Apparently, many Avants do it now. It's the latest thing."

"That's abominable."

"Some of his slaves don't know what he plans for them. He uses his fair face to trick people into thinking he's a compassionate, caring master. It's another one of his favorite games. God, his games. He's psychotic."

Pain etched Quenten's face into a mask of grief. "The girl he had before your purple prize. She was another Hothouse flower. Rosallisa her name was. It wasn't enough for him to rape her. He played games with her mind to break her spirit. First, he pretended to marry her, made a whole sham of loving her. All lies, all part of his long-term plan. Bit by bit, lie by lie, he shattered her self-esteem. He stole her soul. He made her grovel and beg him to take her. And *then* he raped her, used her and threw her away."

Vance thought of Cattleya who had, in all innocence, placed her whole trust and future in the hands of a sadistic monster. He had to save her.

"We have to get out of here," Vance said. "There must be a way."

"No shit."

Quenten laughed manically. He jumped to his feet and grabbed the bar of his cage and let the shock jolt through him. He stumbled back, cursing.

"I've *tried* to escape, Gardener. I've tried to get word back to Earth. Once he let me think that I had almost gotten away, only to reveal he had been tracking me all along. The bastard enjoyed toying with me. Another time, he sent someone in here pretending to be an Earth agent to help me. I saw through that one, but now I don't trust anything anymore. I don't even trust myself anymore. I'm almost glad that he will incinerate my brain after he steals my body. I can't take any more of this, Gardener. I can't."

Quenten's despair infected Vance like lethal bacteria. Scanning the endless cages of soul dead prisoners, all of whom must have yearned for freedom as fiercely as he, Vance could see no way out for either of them.

* * * * *

The day of her wedding, servants assisted Cattleya into a vivavestita of purest white. Her face in the mirror looked so pale that her normally lavender skin looked almost the same shade.

You don't love him, her reflection told her.

He is my Owner. I owe him everything, she replied silently.

You would not be a pet or a slave at the club. Why accept it here? Do you believe that being transgenic means that you are subhuman?

No.

Then why accept anything less than real freedom to choose your own destiny?

Vance told me that, Cattleya thought. She frowned at her reflection. *But he didn't mean a word of it. In the end, he betrayed my trust and put me through hell just to lure me into his bed.*

Yes, he betrayed you, her reflection said sadly. *But that only means he was untrue, not that his words contained no truth.*

"Stop!" Cattleya said aloud. The servant girls blinked at her in surprise. They were low-level cyborgs, not very bright, although they had more speech and human intelligence than demifems.

"Take it off." Cattleya struggled to squirm free of the vivavestita. The tiny paws of the bodice did not want to unclaw and the wings on the skirt began to flap in alarm. "Take it off!"

The cyborg servants fluttered about her in confusion. They helped her unfasten the bundle of fur and feathers and silk that they had recently wrapped around her.

"Bring me something simple to wear," ordered Cattleya. "I must see Lothario. I must explain that I cannot marry him."

* * * * *

Days merged together in the cages, where the lights always glared down on the prisoners and food and water pellets arrived at random intervals through pipes in the floor. Vance passed away some of the time in conversation with Quenten. His first name was Oron. He had been born on Europa, to a poor ice mining family, and earned his way to a military scholarship on Earth through brains, hard work and reliability.

Other times, however, Quenten didn't respond, didn't move much from a fetal position and neglected to eat. Vance tried everything to keep him alert, from cajoling him to issuing bark-like orders.

One day a cadre of cyborg soldiers marched through the rows of cages. Vance at once noted that their uniforms had been tailored a cut above the usual rank and file. A special seal embossed the armor across their chests.

Quenten stood up, blanching. "They've come for me at last. Those are the soldiers assigned to the body-snatching laboratory."

The soldiers passed by Quenten's cage. They stopped before Vance's cell and deactivated the door. The bars folded back.

"You!" The lead cyborg pointed at Vance. "Come!"

"Why are you taking him?" demanded Quenten. "I'm the one you want! Damn you! Damn you, take me!"

The cyborgs ignored him. They shackled Vance's hands behind his back and took him away.

* * * * *

The operating theater where the brain transfers took place must have been designed to convey its maleficent purpose through its soulless and domineering architecture. Two metal beds with metal shackles stood on a podium in the center of the pentagonal room, surrounded by a circle of autonomous robot arms glittering with spikes, probes, needles, saws and laser scalpels. The cyborgs made Vance strip naked, and then they strapped him down to one of the metal beds. They withdrew to discreet posts around the outer rim of the five-sided room.

Lothario entered. He too was nude except for a loose velvet robe. It was hard to believe that his body had ever been handsome. The hard tracks of drink, drugs, overeating and, above all, habitual cruelty now marred the once cherubic blond. A cruel expression twisted his face even now. He stood over Vance sneering with a mixture of gloating and hatred.

"You disappointed me, Gardener," said Lothario Royant-Bor. "I gave you every opportunity to violate my innocent bride. And my medics confirmed what Gustaff promised you, that you deflowered her. But apparently you debauched her without breaking her spirit. In fact, she seems more independent than ever. Can you imagine? She refused to marry me! And not because she discovered the truth, that the ceremony would be a fraud. She thinks that not only does she have the right to marry me, she has the right to refuse to marry me! That slut, that slave, thinks she is the equal of a puregene Avant!"

"It was you all along," Vance said. "You were the one who paid Gustaff to kidnap Cattleya. You knew exactly where she was when you sent me to look for her. You set me up."

"If you had raped her on the way over, as I expected you to, the additional measures might not have been necessary."

"You're sick." Vance shook his head. "Even if you didn't want to marry her, why would you want your concubine raped? Especially after you went through all the trouble of waiting twenty years to have her reared and educated as a fine and delicate lady with an intellect and sensitivity equal to any human woman? It makes no sense."

"It makes perfect sense," said Lothario. "Where is the pleasure in abusing a demifem? The thing is an animal, with no sense of its own dignity and therefore no sense of its own humiliation. Only a creature with pride can be dishonored. An animal can only be hurt. But a woman can be degraded. To take a human and turn her into an animal, or to take a cultured lady and turn her into a mindless whore, to make a person love whom they hate and hate whom they love, that is the most delicious pleasure of all."

"You're sick," Vance repeated.

"Cattleya loves you," Lothario said. "I can use this to break her. Even though she believes you betrayed her, her love for you has not died. But it will after I take your body and go to her without telling her who I really am. I will do all the things to her that you should have done before, Gardener. I will hurt her. I will make her scream until her voice dies in her throat and her love wilts from her heart. And once her love has turned to hate, I will reappear as Lothario once again. I will 'rescue' her and nurture her back to trust and love again.

"And then, only then, once she has come to love and trust me as she once loved and trusted you, will I reveal that I was the master of her fate all along. Then I will brutalize her all over again. You see, a person can recover from a broken spirit once, but never twice. She will truly be my slave then, unable to distinguish love from hate. She will have no will of her own left." He laughed. "And then? Then, Gardener, I will throw her away. I will toss her in a cage with my other leftovers. By then, another toy will be ready for me to play with and destroy."

"No!" Vance bruised himself in his violent struggles to wrench free of the metal restraints. He could not. His whole body pulsed with the need to strangle this evil man.

Lothario shrugged off his robe and lowered himself onto the empty table. The shackles enclosed his wrists and ankles, but unlike Vance, he was not truly restrained, since the table answered to his voice commands.

One of the robot arms advanced on Vance with a needle. Darkness followed.

* * * * *

Groggy, Vance opened his heavy lids. His body felt wrong. He had no time to determine how or why, for the sounds of combat clanged around him. The lights in the room flashed on and off, red and white, in time to klaxons sounding an alarm. The table imprisoned him.

Then he saw Cattleya.

If not for her distinctive purple hair, which whipped around her in a ponytail, he would not have recognized her. She wore the skin-tight black flex-weave armor of a cyborg combat female in place of her usual frilly dresses. But he recognized her graceful martial arts, as beautiful as her dancing but so much more deadly.

She fought the cyborg guards. Amazingly, she was holding her own, because in the machine-crowded operating theater, only two could reach her at a time. They took occasional shots at her, but when she ducked the blasts, the misaimed explosions threatened the two beds. The leader of the cyborgs ordered his men not to shoot.

"Just grab her!" he ordered, obviously frustrated that his giant hulks of machine-men couldn't handle one petite woman.

Vance knew that despite her skills, she wouldn't be able to fight off all the soldiers on her own. There were just too many of them.

"Dammit, release me!" he cursed the metal bed.

To his surprise, the shackles unfolded and let him go.

Vance didn't question his good fortune. He reached up to one of the hovering robot arms and snapped off a needle. From behind, Vance sprang on the cyborg engaging Cattleya and shoved the needle into the cyborg's main jack, at the back of his neck. The soldier arched and malfunctioned. Vance kicked him out of the way and took on his enraged buddy.

Cattleya, meanwhile, swung herself on another robot arm out of the way of a blow. She flipped and landed on the back of her opponent and broke his neck with her thighs as she twirled back off him. She kicked the face of another soldier and rammed the robot arm she had used as a balance beam into a third soldier behind her.

Combat ceased once all the cyborgs lay in heaps on the floor, though klaxons still honked and the lights still flashed red on and off again in a disturbing flicker light. Vance faced the doors, expecting to see reinforcements pour through at any moment. None did. He realized that when the alarm had started, an emergency lock-down had sealed all the doors to the room. He turned to Cattleya, to ask her how she had come to be there. He froze.

Cattleya held a gun, aimed at him.

"Vance?" she asked uncertainly. "That is you, isn't it? I was too late. The transplant already took place."

Vance looked down at his body. He didn't recognize it. Horrified, he turned to the beds. His body lay prone on one, still strapped down and unconscious. The operation had already taken place, and now Vance's brain was in Lothario's old body. Lothario's vile brain must be in his.

"It's me, Vance," he told Cattleya. He winced. His voice sounded too high-pitched to his own ears. "Cattleya, you must believe me. My first wife's name was Margaret. My son's name —"

"Vance, I believe you. You fought beside me. Lothario would not have done that. Besides," she smiled slightly, "he doesn't know martial arts."

"How did you know to come here?"

"I had no idea what Lothario had planned for you or for me until I overheard his conversation with you." She shuddered. "All I knew was that he kept promising to give you a fair trial for kidnapping me, but somehow he never got around to it. I didn't believe he ever would. So I decided to try to free you myself. That's when I realized you had been brought here. I took the uniform of a cyborg servitor so I could infiltrate this room. But although I was able to tap into the room's sound system and overhear your conversation with him, I couldn't enter the room until the cyborg guard changed shift. Then I started to fight them to free you, but the operation had already taken place.

"And Vance?" She bit her lip, apparently not certain he would like what she had to say next. "I did one other thing. I hope you aren't angry, but I didn't know how we would be able to leave this estate alive without a distraction."

"A distraction?"

"When I went to the dungeon where I thought you were, I met Major Quenten. He gave me the code to send a secret signal to Earth, although I don't think he believed I was really going to send it. The Earthers came even more quickly than I expected and are attacking the estate right now."

"The alarm," Vance said. "The lock-down. It's not because of the fight in here, but because of the fight out there."

"Yes."

Vance's mind raced. Plans, schemes, possibilities. He strolled over to his former body. "Well, if the Earthers want Vance Gardener so much that they're willing to fight for him, let's give them Vance Gardener."

"But I think we can still escape before the Earthers find you."

"No. I don't think so." Vance pointed to the door behind Cattleya.

Quenten strode into the room, backed by Earth soldiers. Quenten had found himself a pair of pants and a uniform jacket, though his chest remained bare, exposing still not fully healed lacerations from his time as a captive.

He stopped in front of Vance and glanced at the body still on the operating table.

"If this escape is not another trick, I owe both Gardener and you, my lady," he bowed in Cattleya's direction, "a debt for being instrumental in the release of myself and my crew. But I still must do my duty, however unpleasant, and bring Gardener before the Emperor of Earth. Can you think of any reason I should not?"

"Oron," Vance said quietly.

Quenten's face showed no expression. "Either one of you would know my name. Gardener or Royant-Bor."

"Then you have no choice," said Vance, "except to take both of us and let the Earthers choose which body they want."

Some light of recognition flickered in Quenten's eye. He nodded, ever so slightly. "Exactly the conclusion I had reached, Mr. *Royant-Bor*."

* * * * *

Major Quenten instructed the Earth forces to free the slaves in Lothario's dungeons, but as the Avant's pirate cyborg fleet was on its way back to the palace to defend their master, the Earthers had no time to do much more than unlock all the force shields and then make the jump to hyperspace as quickly as possible.

Major Quenten kept each of his three prisoners in separate cells in the brig, isolated from one another. Occasionally, Cattleya heard Lothario shouting out with Vance's voice. *Fools! I am an Avant of the Anarchion, not your precious bounty! You will pay for abducting me!* At other times, Lothario tried blandishments instead of threats, promising them a fortune if they freed him. The Earthers did not take his claims seriously.

Cattleya still worried. She had hoped that the Earthers would take only Lothario prisoner, but they had the real Vance as well. Did Major Quenten suspect the switch? Her dismay grew when Major Quenten's ship reached its destination, Cabo San Lucas, the imperial capital of the Empire of Earth.

A shuttle flew the prisoners to the peninsula. Cattleya had to admit that Earth was as beautiful as the poets had described. Those deep blue skies owed nothing to terraforming machinery. Below her, the round shuttle window revealed a vista of aqua seas and white deserts, interspersed with glittering palaces and green golf courses. The Earth Emperor was reputed to be especially fond of golf.

A man with several bodyguards met them on the tarmac as soon as the shuttle landed. The man was modestly dressed in slacks and a short-sleeved shirt, with a day jacket hitched on one shoulder. His face showed the lines of many years, but kindly years, and in his youth he must have been devastatingly handsome. Major Quenten saluted him respectfully, and the older man returned the salute.

To Cattleya's surprise, he greeted her next. He bowed, a gentleman to a lady, in keeping with the finest etiquette of the imperial court.

"My lady, your beautiful presence comes as an unexpected surprise," he said gravely. "Major Quenten, surely it is not necessary to have the lady's hands bound?"

"She's more dangerous than she looks, Sire," Major Quenten said. Nonetheless, he unfastened Cattleya's handcuffs.

The older man at once took one of her hands in his, bowed again and kissed her knuckles. Cattleya blushed deep violet. She still wore the black combat armor of a cyborg soldier, but she curtsied as she had been taught.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, my lord. This is my first visit to Earth, and I find your planet lovely beyond all my imaginings of it."

"Ah." The older man's eyes sparkled with appreciation. "Dangerous and gracious. I like this one."

"She was his, er, companion. I never did quite establish what the precise relationship was, but it seemed prudent to take her along."

"Indeed. You always had good taste in women, Vance." The older man went to stand in front of the body of the man he supposed to be Vance Gardener. "Even if your judgment in other areas was lacking."

Lothario opened Vance's mouth to speak but didn't emit a word before the older man slapped him.

"Shame on you," said the older man. "For breaking my brother's heart."

"I am not Vance Gardener!" sputtered Lothario. "I am an Avant of the Anarchion! Your worthless laws do not apply to me. I demand to be released at once!"

The older man shook his head disapprovingly. "The time for games is over, Vance. Your father is dying. His last wish is to see you before he dies."

The real Vance, in Lothario's body, drew in a sharp breath.

"Uncle Nooly," said the real Vance. "The man using my body is correct. I am the true Prince Vancet dy Gwydion of Mars, son of your brother, the King of Mars. I am your nephew."

Chapter Twelve

Vance's declaration that he was Prince Vancet dy Gwydion shocked everyone on the tarmac, for different reasons, except for one man.

The man whom Vance had addressed as "Uncle Nooly", whom Cattleya realized with awe and disbelief must be none other than Emperor Nolan dy Gwydion, sovereign of the Earth Empire, only lifted an eyebrow in mild inquiry.

"Vance," said the Emperor. "Have you gone and misplaced your brain in someone else's body?"

"I'm afraid so, Sire," said Vance.

"And you, Major Quenten, you did not bother to ascertain whether or not my nephew was indeed wholly my nephew? Were you going to give me a body with the wrong brain? Should I be disappointed in the low quality of your competence or of your loyalty?"

Major Quenten's face turned as red as his hair. He hang-dogged his head.

"Forgive me, Sire." He darted a peek at Vance. "After our time spent together in the Avant's prison, I found I could not, that is I could not bring myself to, to, turn him in against his will, perhaps to be arrested or disgraced. In acquiescing to a deception, I broke my vow to you." He sounded miserable. "I will accept court martial without protest."

"Well, you wouldn't be the first officer my nephew has managed to suborn. I dare say a court martial is not necessary. But do put some trust in your own Emperor to know what he is doing, would you please, Major?"

"Sire." Major Quenten seemed overwhelmed. He bowed deeply.

"And now, exactly who is this other fellow whose brain is occupying your body, Vance?"

Vance scowled. "Scum of the galaxy. A slave keeper, a body snatcher, a sadist and a torturer. Your typical Avant, in other words."

"I can vouch for that, Sire," added Major Quenten darkly.

"I am above your laws and pedestrian 'morality'!" spat Lothario. It made Cattleya ill to see his ugly personality twist Vance's handsome face into such an expression of hate.

Major Quenten clearly felt the same way. He regarded Lothario as one would a roach. "Then you should thank God *we* do have respect for the law, or your fate would not be something I would describe in front of a lady. Sire, how did you guess so quickly that he had exchanged brains with the prince?"

"Oh it happens to the best of us from time to time," the Emperor said philosophically. "Even to... But that was a long time ago, of course."

"I apologize for the deception, Uncle Nooly," Vance said. "But if my father is dying..." He took a deep breath. "I must see him."

"Indeed." The Emperor turned stern again. "You made me waste the services of one of my best guard units to search for you. The time has come for you to stop neglecting your duties and reconcile yourself with your father."

Vance straightened his back. "Founding a new colony was not a waste of time. If my father had supported the project instead of sabotaging it by forbidding any Earth corporation to do business with us, thus forcing us to rely on pirates and bootleggers from the Anarchion for our supplies, the colony might not have failed."

"I've told you before, Vance, I cannot issue orders to my brother on how to deal with his own family. No matter how much it breaks my heart to see you two fight. I hope that at least some good can come of this damn illness, if it means that you two will finally put aside your differences." The Emperor's face softened. "I know that he regrets disowning you."

"He has other heirs," Vance said bitterly. "He never needed the black sheep."

"Dammit, Vance, stop being an ass and go see your father," said the Emperor. "And that is an imperial command."

With an ironic flourish, Vance bowed from the waist. "Yes, Your Majesty. In this body?"

"Er, no. I think not." The Emperor grimaced. "Let's have all brains returned to their proper posts first." He held out his hand to Cattleya. "And what about you, my dear? That body is lovely and certainly unique, but your deportment bespeaks a puregene mind. Was your proper body also stolen from you?"

"Yes, Uncle," Vance answered for Cattleya before she could speak. "Unfortunately, we were not able to save her human body. Under the circumstances, we will need your dispensation to marry, Uncle."

"A great tragedy." The Emperor glared at Lothario. "A great crime. But I will make the court understand that despite her appearance, she is not truly transgenetic, but as human as you or I. You may marry your chosen bride and assume your place at your father's palace."

Cattleya said nothing, but inside, her stomach dropped into a dark pit. Vance wanted to marry her! The joy she would have felt at this discovery, however, wilted under the lie he had felt it necessary to tell. From his exchange with the Emperor, Cattleya understood the situation perfectly. A prince of the Earth Empire would never be permitted to marry a creature created in a genetic laboratory.

Vance had demonstrated that he would willingly live a lie in order to marry her.

But could she let him?

* * * * *

Vance awakened from the second operation as disoriented as from the first. In fact, for a single flash of panic, he thought that he had awakened in Lothario's laboratory. Then he recognized the feel of his own arms and legs, his own body. Nor did this room, with its vaulted ceiling, large, open windows overlooking the sea, and warm amber murals, resemble the cold, machine-filled operating theater he had been chained in before. His vision was still fuzzy and his head still groggy, but the smell of salt waves, mown grass and sun-baked brick reassured him.

He was, however, shackled to the hospital bed. Naked.

The door opened. Vance expected one of his father's guardsmen to enter, unchain him and bring him to his father. Despite his blurry vision, he could see that the uniform was wrong. Instead of a soldier, a blonde, pale-skinned nurse in a simple white sheath medical dress entered.

"Your Highness." She stood in the archway even after the door closed behind her. "Your father is sleeping. The Emperor has said that you will be taken to see him in two hours."

"Thank you, nurse. Untie me now."

She did not move. She should have responded to his command with alacrity. What was wrong with her?

"Nurse!" he said, with an edge to his voice.

"You should rest," she said. "You are obviously still muddled from the operation."

"I don't wish to rest. I wish to see the lady who accompanied me here. Untie me!"

"The purple girl?" Scorn showed in her tone. "A freakgene? You are a prince of the Earth Empire. Surely you could do better."

Anger suffused him. His next words were cold. "I am a prince of Earth and I have twice given you a command. If I must repeat myself a third time, I will see you put on report with your superiors."

"Mmm," she said, unconcerned.

She began to move toward the bed. Vance tensed, alarmed rather than reassured. There was something wrong; this woman was no hospital employee. Suddenly, he became self-conscious about his state of nudity. He lay spread-eagle and manacled to the bed. She advanced on him with a sultry stroll and trailed her fingers over his bare leg.

Her touch jolted him into instant arousal. She smiled to see his erection.

"Well, well," she murmured.

He was too humiliated to even demand how dare she make free with him. After all, before he had met Cattleya, he might have found her game amusing and enjoyable. Now, however, the thought of letting a stranger play with him, when the only woman he wanted was a certain orchid-petaled girl, only filled him with revulsion.

"I think I should give you a full exam," said the blonde nurse who was no nurse. "Just to make certain that all your...parts...are fully functional."

Her grin widened to a leer as she spoke, and her hand smoothed a path up his thigh toward his groin.

Vance grit his teeth against the delicious sensation, trying to will his erection back to limp propriety.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "Did my father arrange a marriage for me too?"

It was the only explanation that would explain, though not excuse, her brazenness.

"Mmm," she replied ambiguously.

Her hand closed around his shaft.

"Dammit!" he exploded. "Get your hands off me!"

"Are you sure that's what you want, your Highness?" She began to stroke. He choked on a groan. "I think not. I know what you really want."

"I am engaged..." he began.

"Mmm..." She stroked harder.

"Not to you or to any Earth woman! To that purple girl you spoke of so derisively!"

"No, you are not engaged to her. She will not have you."

At once, his arousal did soften to a limp. "What? You're lying."

"She leaves Earth tomorrow."

"No. I don't believe you."

"Be happy. You're better off free of her."

"No!" He began to thrash in his bonds.

"Let me show you that you're not missing anything." She bent between his thighs and took his penis into her mouth.

His struggles to escape the bed turned into buckling under the assault of sensation. Her tongue and deep, wet mouth surrounded his cock, enticing it back to stiffness against his will. Unbidden, the image of Cattleya suckling on her array of "flesh flutes" jumped into his mind, together with the memory of her on her knees, sucking him. The memory made him harden and in his post-operation confusion, he began to find it difficult to remember that it was not Cattleya with him now. He wanted to lose himself in her, in the sensations she brought to him.

No! He would not give himself to this stranger. He would not betray Cattleya like that...

As he had once broken the bands that tied him to the wall of a docking bay, so his resolve now lent Vance strength enough to snap the wrist guards pinning him down. He swung into an upright seated position and grabbed the blonde off his cock. He shook her by the shoulders.

Her eyes met his. She lowered hers quickly.

He tangled his hand in her blonde hair and crushed her mouth under his.

"I've changed my mind," he said roughly. "Screw the purple girl. Gentlemen prefer blondes."

He kissed her again, plunging his tongue down her throat. She began to squirm away.

"What's wrong? Lost the mood? Just when it was getting good?"

"I thought you wanted to marry her! Now you don't care?" The blonde wiggled ineffectively in his vise-like grip. "Let me go!"

Vance laughed. "Oh Cattleya, Cattleya. Are you jealous of yourself? Do you really believe I want any woman but you?"

She stilled in his arms. "So you did recognize me all along."

"No, only just now. What were you trying to do?"

"Nothing. I came to inform you of when you could visit your father. But when you didn't recognize me..." She blushed. It looked strange on her too-chalky cheeks. He had grown used to her violet-on-lavender blushes. "I thought I could give you a taste of your own medicine."

"I see." He had to laugh. Now that he had unmasked her, his anger dissolved. "Serves me right, I suppose."

He touched her blonde hair. Yes, the dye job on her hair and skin had been well executed, but now that his vision and thoughts were sharpening, he wondered how he had failed to recognize her from the start. No one else had such a piquant face or such deep eyes.

"What is this then? Not a new body, thank god."

"No, just cosmetic adjustments," said Cattleya. "The Emperor offered it, and it seemed rude to refuse. I can have it removed. I will have it removed when I leave tomorrow."

Vance went cold. "I thought that was part of the game."

"No game, Vance. My upcoming departure is real. I cannot marry you."

She must be furious with him for not telling her his real identity sooner. That was understandable, but in time, he was sure, she would forgive him. He searched her face for signs of anger, but her features were unreadable. He marveled at her composure. Cattleya took everything in her stride with equal serenity, be it a debauched slaver's ranch or an Emperor's palace.

"You did not seem surprised at learning my true identity," Vance said as a way of edging into an apology so abject she must melt back into his arms.

"I was very surprised, Vance," she said gravely.

"I'm sorry I never told you truth."

She smiled, though she seemed reserved. "You did tell me, once. In a way."

"I did?"

"That night." She blushed and looked away.

"Oh. Yes. That." He found himself embarrassed as well. "I'm sorry for that too."

"I'm not."

"I never meant to reclaim my title. My father disowned me years ago, and I had no problem with that."

"But the situation has changed."

"Uncle Nooly thinks my father wants to reinstate me to my position."

She nodded.

"I never had a chance to ask you if you wanted to marry me. I just, uh, announced it. I know that was wrong. Forget I said anything. We'll start fresh." He took a minute to unbind his ankles, and then he lowered himself to the floor, on his knees before her. He took one of her hands in his and kissed her palm. "Will you marry me, Lady Cattleya?"

Tears touched her eyes.

"No, your Highness."

"Dammit." He stood up again and captured her in his arms. He smothered her with kisses and glared into her beautiful, tear-streaked face. "I won't take 'No' for an answer. You belong to me."

"I belong to myself," she said with quiet dignity. "You taught me that, Vance. And if I marry you, I must choose to abandon myself, who I really am. I must play this part, live this lie," she touched her blond locks, "for the rest of my life. I won't do that. And I won't make you give up your rightful position to live a lie with me. We are who we are. I am a creature constructed in a laboratory; you are a puregene prince of a vast empire. We can never be both true to ourselves and be together. I will always love you, but this is the last time I will see you."

His fingers tightened on her arms. "I won't let you go!"

"Will you keep me against my will, Vance?" she asked. "I suppose you have the power. You are a prince, and I am a nothing. Well, then. Am I your prisoner? Am I your slave?"

Those words loosened his fingers. He stared at her in agony.

She lifted her face and kissed him, gently, on the lips. Then, just as gently, she disentangled herself from his arms and left the room. She did not look back as the door shut behind her.

* * * * *

Vance knelt formally at the bedside.

"Father."

"Vancet." The man in the bed coughed. "You came."

"Yes, Father."

"I was a fool, a stubborn old fool. I once made the same mistake with my brother and tried to lock him out of my heart. Then, jealousy drove me. This time, though, it was love. I could not stand to see my youngest son, my baby, throw away his life."

Vance had not come here to rehash old arguments, so he bit back the worn protest that exploring and terraforming new worlds for the expansion of humanity was not a waste of time. His father would never understand.

His father coughed again. "I should have trusted you as much as I loved you. Please return to the family, Vancet. Resume your title. It is my last request."

Vance shut his eyes briefly. If he honored his father's request, he would never be able to marry Cattleya. She had made it clear that she would not marry him under false pretences. The only other position he could offer her was to live with him as his mistress — the position she had been bred for but which he would never ask of her.

Yet he could not refuse his father's last request. Vance bowed his head.

"I will honor your wish, Father," he said. He saw an empty future yawn before him, a chasm of joyless duty, lonely and sterile.

"And this," said his father, "is how I want you dispose of your inheritance."

His father pushed a wrinkled, trembling hand at Vance. Vance gently pried open his father's shaking fingers and withdrew a data chip.

"Father?"

The old man had slipped into a sleep from which there would be no awakening, a smile of peace upon his face.

* * * * *

Major Quenten offered to escort her. Shyly, she accepted.

The spaceport at Cabo San Lucus contrasted with the last spaceport Cattleya had seen. The well-heeled travelers stood in orderly lines at their gates. Everything sparkled cleanly. Public machines offered amenities at fair prices. Security guards patrolled the halls with friendly smiles. There were no beggars, no brawls and no slaves. One had the sense that nothing evil could happen in such an idyll.

She had returned to her real appearance, and so her exotic skin and hair color did earn her a few curious glances. There were not nearly so many transgenics and cyborgs here on Earth as in the Anarchion. However, some Earthers, to Cattleya's surprise, chose to dye their hair and skin odd colors, for fashion reasons, not due to biological differences, so even in this, she did not stand out too much.

"If you asked for refuge on Earth, I am sure it would be granted," Quenten told her as they waited in line to purchase tickets.

"I don't belong here," Cattleya said. "As lovely as it is." Besides, if she remained, she would always be tempted to try to see Vance. "But what about you, Major? I don't understand why you would want to return to the Anarchion after you were held prisoner there for so long."

"I'm not a major anymore," he reminded her lightly. "I resigned my commission."

"Yes, I don't understand why. The Emperor did not seem to want to punish you."

"No, he granted me leave as a favor, not a punishment. When I was a prisoner in Royant-Bor's palace I met another prisoner, a slave. When the Earth force attacked the palace and rescued us, I looked for her but couldn't find her. I need to know what happened to her. If she is even still alive."

"She?" Cattleya caught the particular catch in his voice.

Major Quenten blushed. "Um," he said.

That was all. Cattleya had to smile.

"I understand. I hope you find her." A concern that had been nagging her brought a notion into her thoughts. "I also met two other slaves while I was a prisoner at Steeplechase Lodge. I would like to know their fates. But I don't know how I would find out."

"Tell me what you know of them. I will keep an eye out for them while I search for Rosallisa," offered Quenten.

"Their names were Lyndra, daughter of an Avant family, and Hellenia, a Unicornia, a transgenic."

He nodded. The line had reached the computer counter. When Quenten tapped in their destination, a red light flashed. Quenten gave Cattleya a rueful smile. "They won't sell tickets to the Anarchion over the machine. One of us has to go speak to a shipline manager in person. It may as well be me; I can smooth things over more quickly. Why don't you wait in the lobby while I take care of this?"

She nodded. He disappeared through a door marked "Authorized Personnel Only". Cattleya drifted over to the chairs by the windows that looked out over the bay. Around her, families bustled with luggage and children, saying their farewells to traveling loved ones. She sighed and watched them with bittersweet envy.

When Quenten finally returned he had an odd look on his face.

"I've found a private ship that will take us," he told her. "I'm not sure you'll like it."

* * * * *

Cattleya turned to Quenten and reproached him, "How could you?"

"Don't blame him, Cattleya," said Vance, who turned out to be the one in command of the ship transporting them. "I had to see you again. And I couldn't stand the thought of you traveling through the Anarchion unprotected. Once this ship has reached its destination, I'll leave you in peace, if that's what you want."

"I don't want you giving up your title—"

"I have no intention of doing so," he said. "I made a promise to my father just before he died that I would accept my inheritance. I'll honor that promise. But I have an obligation to protect you as well. And there's something I want to show you."

Still suspicious, Cattleya followed Vance through the spacious ship until they reached a storage bay. He pressed in the code and the doors swished open.

"Oh!" Cattleya stared. "It's beautiful."

The bay had been transformed into a garden grid of exotic tropical plants. Even the aisles between the neat rows of trellises had been planted with grass turf. Orchids of various species grew over the trellises. Other flowers draped over the sides of planters dangling from the ceiling. Twisty irrigation hoses threaded the whole room. A wonderful fragrance wafted from the garden.

"There are a dozen other bays like this, filled with the seeds for the new world."

"What new world?"

"This ship is heading for a previously unpopulated planet. My father, before he died, commissioned me to found a new colony there. My father's last wish was that I take my inheritance and use the investment to found a new Earther colony at the edge of known space. I am looking for a few thousand brave souls willing to risk the wilderness to build a new world. Cattleya, if you will not come with me as my wife, will you at least agree to sign on as a terraformer?"

Her jaw dropped. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to decide yet. The journey will take several months." His eyes smoldered with desire as he looked at her, and he wrenched his gaze away. "I'll let you explore the garden without bothering you..."

"Vance." She touched his departing back. "Stay."

He turned around took her in his arms. He kissed her hair, the back of her neck, the hollow of her throat. She slid her hands inside his silk shirt, feeling the smooth, hard muscles of his chest. Their mouths met, parted, then rejoined in a long, intimate kiss.

"You taught me to love again, Cattleya," Vance said. "You taught me to be human again. I love you."

Before Cattleya could reply, the lights in the bay dimmed.

"It's the night cycle for the plants," Vance said.

The only light came from the door marked "Emergency Airlock Only, Do Not Open", which cast a green and red glow over the room.

"Sorry," said Vance, with a smile, "not the most romantic place I've chosen."

"It's perfect," said Cattleya. "It's perfect, Vance."

He slipped her garment, a loose Earther dress, from her shoulders. He stroked her with the wisp of silk as he drew it down over her breasts and hips.

The discarded dress billowed and floated to the grassy sod that carpeted the garden floor. Vance gently lowered Cattleya onto her back. He spread her legs. There was a gleam of mischief in his eye.

"What are you up to?" she asked, drawing in her legs.

"Oh no you don't! You're not going anywhere." He spread her legs wide again, and fastened a flexible irrigation hose from either side of the aisle around each of her ankles. He did the same to her wrists, so that she lay spread-eagle before him between the lattice walls of flowers.

"Do you really think this can hold me?" asked Cattleya with a smile. She squirmed experimentally. To her surprise, the slender plastic tubes proved surprisingly strong. Her movements only drew the knots taut.

"Vance!" she protested. He laughed in wicked delight.

From a nearby plant, he plucked an orchid with wide splayed petals and a downy stamen. He brushed it along the inner curve of her thigh. As the feathery caresses drew closer to her pussy, her breath began to quicken.

He teased her pussy with the flower. The light strokes drove her wild. At turns, she lifted her hips or tried to pull away, both drawn to the sensation and tortured by the taunting promise of it. All her struggles were in vain, and Vance continued to play with her until she began to whimper.

"Vance, please! I need —"

All at once, a tiny *click-click-beep* sounded, and the irrigation tubes throughout the room began to spray a mist of nutrient water.

Cattleya squealed in surprise. The water was pleasantly warm, not uncomfortable, but it had taken her by surprise. The formula of the nutrients lent the water an iridescent glow that sparkled even in the dim room.

She was already nude, but Vance still wore his white shirt and black trousers. The water pasted the thin white material to his broad chest. Rivulets of luminous liquid outlined the ridges of his pectorals and abs. His hair formed sleek curls against the nape of his neck. Cattleya drew in a sharp breath. He had never looked sexier.

Her own body also glittered with droplets of the shining mist. Desire deepened in Vance's dark eyes as he gazed down at her. He peeled his drenched clothing off and stretched in the mist. Now every sculpted muscle was outlined in slick, wet light. His erect cock gleamed like a light saber.

He knelt between her legs. Lowering his mouth to her breasts, he licked the liquid off her nipple.

"Sweet," he said. "So sweet."

He lapped the water from off her breasts, and when the mist drizzled more, he lapped each breast again.

The irrigation tubes tying her wrists and ankles were starting to grow uncomfortably tight. Water was damming up inside the knots. Before Cattleya could complain, Vance noticed the problem. By now the knots were so tight that it was impossible to untie them, but Vance didn't even try. Instead, he reached over her body and snapped the tubes apart.

The broken tubes began to spray a spritz of water.

"Thank you," said Cattleya. She added mischievously, "Now I can get away!"

She turned around and started to crawl away.

"You can never escape me, Cattleya," Vance said, grabbing her about the waist. "I think that deserves a spanking!"

"Let me go! What are you doing? Eeek!"

Something plunged between her legs. He had inserted one of the cut tubes into her cunt. The spray of warm water flushed up her pussy. Then, with the cut tube from the other side, he began to whack her bottom. The ductile tubing had a surprisingly substantial bite when it hit, like a slender leather whip. But after each whack, he turned the spray of water onto her blushing buttocks to cool and soothe the heat of impact.

Then he aimed the spritz a little lower, and the stream of water sprayed her clit. He pulled the tube in her pussy in and out, and then concentrated that spray on her clit as well.

The sensation drove her into a frenzy. They were both on their knees. Trapping her thighs between his, he mounted her from behind.

As he drove his cock into her, he kept both tubes spraying water on her clit. His cock gyrated inside her as the water pressure cascaded over her clit, and the mist rained down on them both. Cattleya came with a cry and then came again mere seconds later, and still he did not release her. He continued to ply her clit with streams of water and plunge in and out of her until he screamed his own pleasure. He dropped the tubes and clutched her breasts as he sprayed his own "nutrients" into her.

They collapsed together in a delicious heap of mingled limbs. Vance hugged her to him and kissed her forehead again and again.

"You never answered my question, Cattleya. Will you marry me and found a new world with me? It's not a condition of accepting a job as terraformer. As you said, you belong to yourself. If you refuse me again..." His eyes darkened. He drew a deep breath. "I will honor your wish. But we can be together and be true to our dreams, Cattleya. I hope you can see that."

"Yes. Vance. Of course, yes."

"Yes you will sign on as a terraformer, or yes you will agree to marry me, or yes to both?"

She snuggled deeper into his arms.

"Yes to both, Vance. Yes to you."

It was long before they tired of the kiss that followed. Eventually, however, Cattleya managed to ask him, "But where are we going?"

"Right now the planet has no name, only an index number." He grinned at her. "But I was thinking we might name it Orchid Garden."

About the Author

Vashi Valant has been a mermaid, a forklift operator, a humanitarian aid volunteer and a homeless shelter counselor. She has yet to try her hand at bioengineering, a stint in the space station, or international espionage, although these activities are on her to-do list. She is married to a love machine, and with him has recently created an adorable cyborg baby named after a Norse god. She now writes full time.

Vashti welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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Also by Vashti Valant

Slave of the Goblin



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