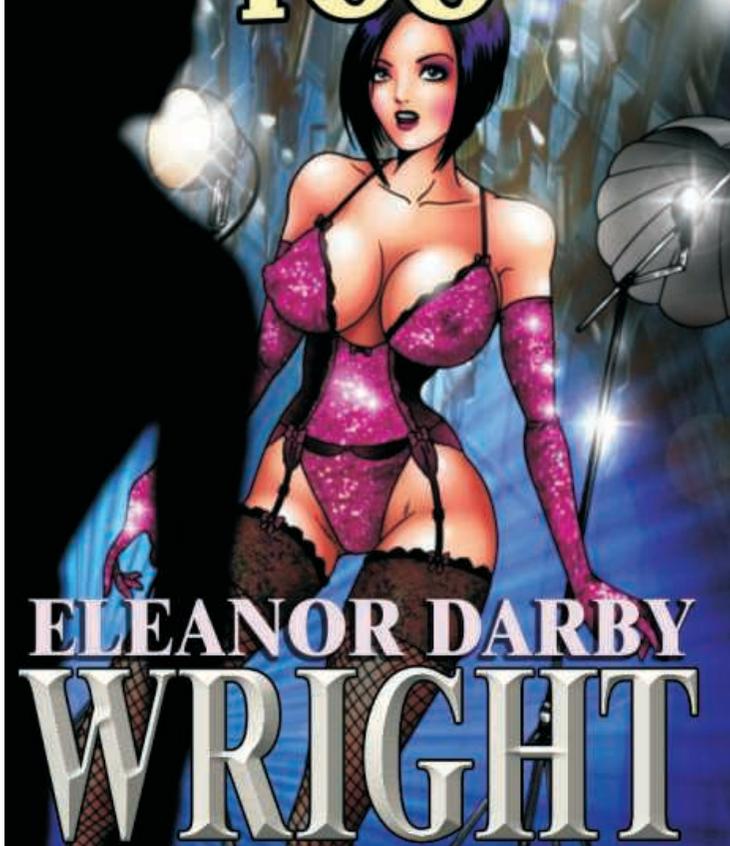


AVATARS ARE US TOO



ELEANOR DARBY
WRIGHT

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AVATARS ARE US, TOO

by Eleanor Darby Wright

I was sobbing then as blackness caved in all around me. I could feel the imprint of Bart on me but he wasn't there any more. He was gone. I had never felt despair like it before. The casket in which I had been lying opened. It opened and I had a feeling as if a hurricane had washed over me.

"Would you like a cold drink, Mike?" asked an earnest young man in a suit, clipboard in hand.

I stared at Grant, stared at my hairy hand on the edge of the casket, stared at the checked shirt and jeans that I had been wearing when I entered the casket.

Grant smiled at me. "Seems so real at times, doesn't it?" he said. "Such a long session as well, Mike, ah, Mr Douglas. Perhaps too long for a first time, which is why we had to send in your partner to find you. Um, and here she is. He's still a little bit under, Miss Reid, um, Brandy."

Brandy was wearing a red blouse with her grey skirt. Her eyes were so blue, china blue. How come I hadn't recalled when I was under where I had first seen Bart's lovely eyes before?

"You didn't sign the form," said Brandy soberly as we stepped out of Avartech and looked across the street at the cafeteria there. I shuddered as I saw the grille and the opening that led to steps that went down. Gosh, had I really been in there?

"You let them have your avatar?" I asked her and Brandy shivered.

"I'm not as rich as you are, Mike," she said slowly. "Letting them keep it meant that I don't have to pay them as much."

"But that was only a quarter ..." I began.

"Yes," Brandy said unhappily. "I sold them my other avatars as well."

"So, others can use them?" I asked. My head was still trying to grasp that I had just lost nearly two months of my life. Two months! They'd said a few hours at the start, well, maybe a day, but not longer than four days under. That was the record for a newbie. Some elders went on for much longer, the

techs had said. Avatars for them were a surrogate form of life.

"I will never do this again," said Brandy with a shudder.

"Why not?" I said, dreading to ask her about her last trip in particular.

"I was an alien in the first one!" Brandy said then in a rush and she was angry. "It was the craziest thing. I was an alien warrior, a man! I was in a war party that was stealing this woman and taking her back to my tribe. I made her my wife and, and, well," she shuddered, "I don't know why I agreed to adult content, I really don't."

"You had sex with her?" I asked, my throat dry. Could it have been Brandy who had made love to me and whom I had loved so passionately? "That must have been awful for you."

"No," said Brandy. She was blushing a bright red up to the roots of her dark hair. "It was incredible, actually. She was so loving, so womanly. No man could have resisted her, Mike. I don't know how to tell you, how to describe her, but I was in love with her and she seemed to love me. Even when she was resisting me at first, I could sense it in her. She wanted me. She was in love with me. Once we were married and I really did marry her, me a warrior, if you can believe it. She, she did everything that she could for me as my wife. She travelled the forest with me, made my bed and my meals, and, and she was pregnant with my baby when I left her."

"How long were you with her?" I had to ask, such a relief coming over me to know that what she was saying was not about me, not at all.

"Months, it seemed," said Brandy gloomily. "Oh, she was so delightful, especially on our wedding night, and the honeymoon." Oh, gods, it could have been me!

"The things she wanted me to do," Brandy was going on, not knowing how she was torturing me. "How could I leave her when she was so delighted to be having my baby? I just said my release word and got out of there! It was just too weird!"

"Too much time passed," I said anxiously. "It seemed like months but it wasn't. So it must have been all a dream."

"No," said Brandy, giving a shudder and pulling her coat tighter around her. She needed a drink. So we headed across to the café across the street. "This avatar stuff, it's not really ours, you know."

"ETs?" I asked her skeptically. "Sending us radio messages across the cosmos so that we can understand them, live as them, they live as us? They're savages as well with green-tinted skin and pointy ears?"

"Davis, the tech, was arguing that with the white-haired prof," said Brandy. "I was supposed to be out of it. Prof said it was a test program that we had intercepted. Using it, that said that we were interested. He thinks it's something developed for long space voyages, like a holodeck or something. They got technical so quickly, I couldn't follow it all."

I grunted. "What happened after your alien adventure?"

Brandy looked like she was about to cry. "I, I was a mother," she said, "with a beautiful, little girl. Only, only," she couldn't look at me then and I was so glad as I would have given myself away completely, "my little girl when I bathed her, she wasn't a little girl, she

was a little boy. I was raising my son as if she was my daughter. I even convinced her to go on when she told me she wasn't a girl. I think she was trying to get back to what she was. I was Marjorie Burns and she was Catherine."

Brandy said all that as if I should know what she was talking about. She looked at me hopefully.

"Should I know the names?" I asked, my throat so hoarse. Brandy nodded, standing up and taking a newspaper from the stack by the cash register. Her hands were trembling as she pointed to a several pictures in the paper.

'Katie Burns marries child sweetheart!' The headline screamed off the page. Catherine Burns, I thought, that's who I was! I stared at the lovely, young woman kissing her boy friend, now her husband. "Since we were children together," Katie was quoted as saying, "Brian and I have always loved each other. He used to be so jealous of other boys looking at me, even when I was ten."

'The lovely Katie, one of Britain's leading musical actresses, will be on honeymoon for a month with her new husband, and then will open a revival of a revamped *South Pacific*,' noted the article.

"If you were her mother," I said slowly, "it was a dream about her early life, just a dream."

"She was my daughter," said Brandy, choking a little. "She really was. And I made her into a little girl! Who would be so sick as to make up a dream like that?"

I couldn't say anything about that then. Brandy really believed she had been Marjorie Burns.

"Did you do another experience?" I asked her.

“No, I couldn’t,” said Brandy, looking quite distraught. “I did get to see an avatar, a girl named Naomi. She looks so beautiful in her tank, like a fish on the end of a fishing line, waiting to awake. They wanted me to be her as a dancer in a chorus line but I couldn’t!”

“Why would she be floating in a tank?” I asked with a shiver, thinking of the wonderful girl I had been.

“She needed the money for some operation,” said Brandy. “She sold her story to a place like this for that!”

“A place like this?” I asked.

“They’re only interested in the bizarre, the people here at Avartech,” said Brandy angrily. “Didn’t you find that all your experiences had kinky sex in them? Or was that just me?”

“You didn’t become Naomi,” I had to say.

“Oh yes, but I knew what I would be doing,” Brandy said fearfully. She glanced over my shoulder at the doorway. I knew that she was looking at the entrance to where I had entered Mistress Joanne’s Training Institute. She must have gone in there as well, but as Bart. I shivered. Over my head, in an apartment, right at that moment ... but it had all dissolved, hadn’t it? It had been a dream, hadn’t it? A terrible dream as I had thought that it really was me, Mike Douglas, who had been changed into the lovely Cindy Williams. I know that I didn’t walk out of the entertainment section. I had woken up, my body convulsing with regret at leaving Bart behind, Cindy’s lover, my lover.

Brandy had known that she was going to be Bart. She helped Avartech to unplug an avatar who had

gone too deeply in and wouldn't release, Brandy told me. Oh, but she had been a man again and the girl had been so pretty. She glanced in terror at me then and didn't say anything about Cindy being a sissy, being a male, being me.

"No wonder she didn't want to come back. I wouldn't have wanted to if I had been as elegant and pretty as her," said Brandy, really shakily. "They'd told me she was an old woman, about thirty, you know, but she wasn't at all. She was so young and so womanly. I had to m-make l-love to her three, four times before I tricked her into using her release word. Oh, she didn't want to let go of me. I shouldn't have done it. She loved me so."

"It was a dream," I said woodenly.

Brandy shook. "I saw her body fall lifeless on the bed," she said. "And I got up and crossed the street to Avartech, went in, got into my casket and was fitted up again. I woke up as me. I wished I was dead then. No, don't tell me that that was a dream, Mike. That one wasn't. I saw the avatars that time. I really did. I killed Cindy, Mike."

"She'll be reactivated by someone else who wants a depraved thrill," I said to Brandy. I think she was going to cry then.

"I just hope she meets someone who really loves girls like her," Brandy sobbed. "I shouldn't have done what I did to her. She was so happy with me. Oh, gods, Mike, you must think I'm a lesbian, mustn't you? But I didn't choose what they made me be! Honestly I didn't! What did they put you through? You were stuck for a while as well, weren't you, but you were up when I got back to Avartech."

“I want to think about what I did first,” I told Brandy then, my head pounding. “I’ll write something up. Maybe, I can use your experiences as well.”

“Oh, please do,” said Brandy fervently. “If we can just prevent it ever happening again to another person like Cindy, it will be worth it. The public needs to be warned. Write a great article, Mike. I know a couple of top editors who owe me real favors. I’ll have anything you write made public. Not national security, or ETs, will stop us exposing Avartech for what it is!”

“Then you could never go back there,” I reminded her.

“Who would want to?” asked Brandy again.

My apartment was dusty. There were a hundred messages on my phone. All I wanted to do was go into the bathroom and study myself. I shuddered and knew that I didn’t know where to start. How could I arch my eyebrows without giving myself away? No, I wasn’t that brave. I couldn’t become Cindy again without help. I shivered and went back to the darkened café across the street from Avartech. There were people going down the steps beside the café, where I had trod so recently, where Greg had taken me. People were going down the familiar steps into the bar or club next to the café.

My heart was racing as I finally got up enough courage. I stumbled down the steps and reached for the five hundred dollars ‘cover charge’ I had. It should get me started. I would spend all the rest of my savings if I had to, for a chance to become Cindy again. I hesitated about going in, my mind still churning.

Brandy had said that she had seen the avatars we used. She’d described Naomi floating in a tank. She

had me half convinced that there was a lot more to avatars than I had thought. Maybe it wasn't all just lying in a tanning bed and dreaming away. Brandy had said that Cindy was so pretty. I ached inside every time I thought of her saying that. So, perhaps I was wrong about it all being dreams, nightmares more like, I thought sourly.

I should have enlightened Brandy, so bitter about the way she had treated Cindy. But no, I couldn't tell her about myself. I would tell her that I had writers' block. I couldn't write at all about Avartech. I could use her experiences, I would tell her, if she wanted to talk to me about them. I couldn't tell her mine. How could I as she hadn't realized yet, and Avartech hadn't told her, that we had shared 'experiences' as Avartech called what we had undergone?

As she had left, Brandy had said something about her shrink not wanting her to talk to anyone else but her. They would work through her dreams, Brandy said, using the word that I had used to sneer at what we were doing.

It was no good. I had to find out for sure what was going on with Avartech. With my heart thumping, I waited for a crowd of guys coming down the same steps I had taken to enter a world of forced feminization, a world populated by sissies and those who preyed on them. I waited to be taken into Mistress Joanne's Sissy Training Institute.

Only the Institute wasn't there. The club didn't want the huge cover charge I'd brought with me. Gloria, Bart and his friend had talked about the fee for picking out and selecting a sissy to pleasure you. There were no sissies, however, just a regular bar, *The Warehouse Arms* at the bottom of the steps. There was a darts

club competition going on. There were no girls acting as hostesses or asking for cover charges. There was a local television channel set up with three cameras filming the event.

“Cover charges?” a distracted barman said to me, heading off to serve someone else as I had a beer in front of me. “Oh, yes, we do that when we have a rock band or some entertainment in here. Should come on Saturdays, though. Really lively in here then, not like today with the beer league championships.”

“Can I go up to the apartments?” I’d asked the bartender then, when he returned and was preparing more liquor for a waiter to deliver to customers.

“The what?” he’d asked me, more interested in the darts’ matches than in me.

“The apartments over the café,” I’d said. “I was in one ...”

The bartender reached under his part of the bar and gave me a key that was labelled ‘master’.

“Up the stairs,” he said. “Don’t break anything.”

I was trembling as I went up the stairs where I, as Cindy Williams, had led my admirer, knowing that he and I were going to be lovers very soon. I couldn’t believe what was at the top of the stairs. A cavernous, deserted floor spread out before me. The lights didn’t work but I could see framing as if for office walls or something. I went across the floor and looked out of the window.

The former warehouse across the street, its office part across from me, was dimly lit. There were some people at work, though. It looked like a clinic to me, several of the people in white coats or with different instruments in their hands. Yes, that was Avartech. I

could look down and could see the word on the wall, across from me, that marked its entrance. It existed.

I shivered. But Cindy couldn't have existed. No, there were no apartments here at all, no club, no sissies in training as I had been. There was no magazine being produced, no models, not even a floor that they might have worked on. There was just the pub, or club, down the stairs and below me, in one corner of another vast, empty warehouse.

"Did you want to put your name down for one?" asked the bartender, a clipboard on the bar in front of him.

"For one what?" I asked him.

"For one of the apartments they're going to build up there," said the bartender with a frown. "Didn't you say that you wanted to look where they were building them?"

"I looked," I said, leaving my drink unfinished as I headed out, towards the door and the steps up to the street.

I would have left completely but for one guy in the crowd who looked up, startled to see me. He turned his back, scrunching down, so that I wouldn't recognize him.

"Grant?" I asked, sitting down beside him.

"I have to go," Grant said, flushing, in a suit and tie as I had seen him the first time. "Just one for the road, you know."

I grabbed the young man's arm. "Tell me, Grant," I said to him. "How can you be here and be in my avatar FF experience? How does that work?"

Grant had told me all about the weird experiences I had signed up for because I had not known that FF, for example, was Forced Feminization. I had thought CD was a compact disk, not crossdressing. A TV to me was a television, not a transvestite.

“You led me across the street,” I said to him thickly, “and gave me to Mistress Joanne. You were the one who named her to me. But there’s nothing here.”

Grant looked around furtively. “No,” he said, with a shudder. “But you knew it was an avatar experience, didn’t you?”

“Just exactly what is that, Grant?” I asked him. “Just what did you wackos over there in Avartech do to me? How could you be in that experience as if it was real and be here now as well?”

It was so real, the mud oozing between my feet, the fetid smell of the swamp just as I remembered it. I knelt on the edge of the clearer pool and cupped my hands to obtain a drink for myself from the running part of the water. Memories flooded back as I recalled the glorious time when I had been Shanalla. My husband, oh how warm and shuddery I became at that thought, my darling husband Sebo had been so loving to me, letting me drink from his hands, before he put them around my tush, and pressed me to him. Why, oh why, had I cut off that ‘experience’ by saying my release word so soon, after only three days with him?

How was I to know that my time with him, loving him as a woman, I had been a woman totally, my vagina on fire when he touched it, had been only hours in

my coffin? Sebo had captured me from the Ashen tree because he had seen me and fallen in love with me.

That is what I had learned from the talk of the men who had captured me. I had known from the start that Sebo was in love with me. I couldn't be a woman, I had thought. I didn't want to be a married woman. But once we were married, Sebo had loved me as a man should love a woman, all my resistance fading away. I was his woman. I was his wife. Why did I think it so shameful to be a woman, loved by a man so gloriously, that I had to break off the experience so soon, ashamed that I was his woman?

At least, that's what I thought had done.

Well, I wouldn't be making love with Sebo any more, I mused as I stood on the pathway. I could almost feel that I was Shanalla and, something I hadn't told Grant, I would have loved to be her again. I had felt myself all over as soon as I had become aware that I was no longer in the Avartech lab. I was chagrined to find that I was now a young male, out on the hunt with other members of my tree, hunting for a bride. What else would I be doing, I asked myself angrily. It was just like the experience in which Sebo had been hunting for Shanalla, me, his bride. Only now, I was the hunter, the male.

It didn't matter how many experiences I had had, Grant had told me. Every new session began with an adventure here, in this ET world, something that the head honchos believed were messages embedded in the radio waves that they had interpreted. Those interpretations allowed them to build Avartech. No, Grant couldn't show me the avatars.

Grant's duplicate was in the locked room where they were stored. He'd been in it when he had taken

me to my last experience, the Forced Feminization one that I had 'requested'. They always did it like that. It was no fun if I didn't think that it was really happening to me, that I was really being transformed into a woman. No, I couldn't see what had been done with my avatar, Cindy.

I didn't have enough money to be Cindy again. Some of the first users found that they really liked being their avatar and refused to release. What could Avartech do? It took money to keep the originals alive and well. That was why they were experimenting now with automatic recalls. No, I could not see her, he told me forcefully. Cindy was in the 'safe'.

I hadn't signed over the avatars from my last 'experience' for others to enjoy, Grant noted. But if I signed off on the avatars I had used, I could get a new set of experiences. Did I want to sign up and go out again as an avatar? Grant could do that for me.

I told Grant that I wanted to be what I was before. I wanted to be Shanalla, Catherine, Naomi or Cindy again but I was ashamed to name them. A man like me wanting to be a woman, a little girl, a travesti, or a sissy. I couldn't admit that, aloud.

Since it was late at night, Grant mentioned that he only had access to the coffin-like chambers that someone like me could use to have an experience. Diffidently, I thought, Grant said that he could procure the sedatives from the fridges, the ones allowing me to relax enough. Would I like him to send me on an 'experience'?

Do bears love honey? Of course, I wanted to re-live what I had undergone before. I signed off with regret on Cindy and the others while Grant called in frowning techs to help him. Soon, I could sense by the greyness

about me that my brainwaves were influencing the avatar I was connected to. Ah, I began to live again.

But now I was male, a hunter. The Aravee had women enough for all of us, Mabo, our leader, told me. We had driven bushbucks and their does in a great herd across the river opposite to the Aravee tree. It had been too great a prize and the Aravee men were across the river, feasting, word had come back to me, the youngest and slightest warrior of the hunting band.

The strongest men had surged forward to be first in the raid. They would seize the prettiest brides. Garo had leered at me then. "I'll bring her mother for you, little one," he had said to me, mocking me as Mabo had said that he always did. I was supposed to ignore him.

"I'll get my own beauty," I had said, hefting the thin spear I carried.

"You will wait on the pathway," Mabo had commanded me. "And remember, Calo. Some women are quieter than hunters in the bush. If we get two to share, we must consider this a fortunate hunt."

So I guarded the pathway and seethed as the morning lengthened. The forest remained undisturbed. I had almost given up waiting, and was set to return to the camp we had made in a river copse, when I heard a gentle whistle of the marasa, the bird that nests in our tree.

I called back. It had to be our men returning as the marasa hates the swamps. Mabo would know that it was clear to come down the pathway.

I didn't see at all who flung the stone that crashed into the side of my head. But I wasn't out completely. I saw a delicate foot in front of my prone body. The toe-

nails were painted a bright red, a skirt floating about shapely legs, as a girl knelt beside me.

"He's pretty enough," said the girl.

"If he lives," said a man's voice behind me.

"We killed enough today," said another, creaky voice. "Better we send this one back as a message."

"Oh, we will," said the girl then with a laugh that made what was left of my senses cringe. "When we've finished with him."

I came to my senses in a rattan tent, on a rattan bed, soft pillows beneath me. There was pain still on the back of my head. I tried to lift my hands but both they and my feet were tied to the bed.

"Aralla is awake," called a young girl's voice and I felt the slight breeze on me then that spoke of a disturbance in the air.

Aralla? Who is she, I thought, having had an impression that I was alone. I had guessed that I was in a woman's shack as female scents seemed to rise from the pillows and dominate all other smells in the tent.

"You are awake?" asked a voice I recognized from the path. I could see feet, with painted toe nails in front of me, the hem of a pretty, yellow dress swaying against me, making me want to sneeze with all the girl's fragrances that assaulted me.

"Yes," I groaned, as I lay, pinioned, face down.

"Quinna," said the girl, pushing a wet cloth into my face. I drank from it, knowing that the drug would immobilize me for a while but it would wear off fairly soon.

I was untied but, when I tried to speak, what came out of my mouth was all gibberish. I was raised to a sitting position. I found that I was bound up in a sort of cloth. Something else was wrong with me. I felt all these hard little things bouncing around my neck. I reached up to brush them off but I couldn't. They were part of my hair. I had beads woven into my hair. But only women did that. Only women of the river trees did that. Fright flooded through me.

"Wrrshmsrrm," I said, trying to ask what they had done to me.

"Sit still, Aralla," said a soft woman's voice, my fright growing as she used a girl's name to me. "A girl who has been hurt like you needs her rest."

I'm not a girl, I tried to say, panic rising in me as my hair seemed so heavy. Some strands swept in front of me and they were red. Red! Only girls dyed their hair red. Only girls painted their fingernails and toenails. I got my hand free. I had long, red fingernails!

I squawked again in panic. "It's all right, Aralla," said the somber-faced woman looking down at me. "This hurt of yours will not change your wedding day. The brothers will still marry you today, the appointed day. Neither will give up his right to have you as his bride and Sanna decrees it will be so. The goddess is pleased that you will have two husbands at once. What a fortunate girl you are!"

I was being mocked. I saw it then. The raid had gone badly. I was captured and I was being mocked by the Aravee. Where were my companions? They would set me free. We of the Merebo never left someone captive in our rivals' encampments.

Then, I recalled what I had heard. There had been much killing and someone had not wanted to kill any more and so I had been spared. Spared for this, mockery and humiliation. They had dressed me in a woman's dress. I could feel the long skirts about my legs now. I could feel straps about my chest, about my waist and between my legs.

The women of our encampment laughed at the underclothing of the northern women. "They need breast straps to make them look like the voluptuous women of our trees," Mabo had said to me when we men had seriously discussed the women we were after in this long-distance raid.

We had raided too many of our neighbors for women. Now, they were under so much closer guard in the south. So we had spread our nets wider, slipping into this northern tribe for the chance of securing new mothers. I knew that this was why the Aravee were dressing me like this, like a woman. It was the sort of thing they liked to do, make a mockery of their enemies.

I had sandals put on my feet, footwear unlike anything that I had worn before. These were strapped around my ankles. My toes, with their painted toenails, were also pushed under a strap. When I was lifted, there were high heels at the back and I wobbled as I tried to walk in them. How the women laughed at me then.

A young girl put a hoop around my ankles, attaching it with ties to the dress I was wearing. I stepped forward and I was restricted in how I could move. I took such short, mincing steps just like the girl beside me, her hair red and beaded just like mine, I thought in shame.

The older woman put her hands on my hips and made me swing them. I thought for a moment that I was back in the sissy classes where the girls there had done the same thing to me, making me, a man, walk like a woman. I knew how to do this, didn't I, I thought bitterly, swishing properly along the boardwalk that was made for women in shoes like mine to walk on, I saw.

"Aralla knows how to be a woman," laughed the girl walking beside me.

"Hush, Perella," said the grey-haired woman leading me into the noisy circle where everyone seemed to be busy packing up their huts onto squalling carry-beasts.

A tall, dark-haired man turned as I approached. "We leave when the first moon rises, Sanna," he said, as I stood there, shivering in my long skirt, flashes of being a woman in my past experiences running through me. "We will load the young women's lodges in just a moment."

"We will have a marriage circle before we break this camp," said the old woman firmly, who must have been a priestess of some sort.

"Where is the Merebo?" asked the dark-haired man then. "Did you leave him in the young women's tent?"

Sanna turned and looked at me. Perella laughed at the frowning warrior. "Aralla is here," she said, pushing me forward. I swished in the long dress, my hair bobbling around my neck and back, making me shiver uncontrollably.

I didn't dare to look up. I knew the man would be laughing at me, a warrior like him. I was so young, so small and thin compared to the muscular, green-tinted

man in front of me. A strong hand reached forward then and lifted my face.

“You want this one, Perella?” the man asked then.

“I can’t have her,” said the girl then. “She’s a captive, and that means she’s a woman. You or Grish have to marry her before she can be my sister.”

I looked up fearfully then into dark, dark eyes and the man looked at me intently but I couldn’t read at all what was in his face. “Nnnlellelenn,” came out of my mouth as I tried to tell him that it wasn’t all right with me. I couldn’t believe that they made all male captives into women. There would be no mothers then, no healthy children.

Everyone knew why there were raids for new mothers for the trees. It wouldn’t be right for me to be married as a woman. I couldn’t have his children, I thought with a shiver, as other feelings, old familiar feelings came to my mind, thoughts of being a travesti and a sissy. I didn’t want to do that again, did I, I thought, but my heated skin was telling me differently. I knew that even if I acted as a woman with a man, I couldn’t be a mother. I tried to tell this tall man that but he just shrugged at the gibberish coming from my mouth.

“We should have slit his throat on the pathway,” the warrior said. “I’ll talk to Grish. Gather your circle, Sanna, but it mustn’t interfere with the packing. The invaders will be here in the morning.”

I had looked down at myself and the green dress that was so tight about me. There were definite mounds on my chest. As I moved, I could feel that I was wearing some kind of bra. I could feel that my nether parts were bound as well. I had a necklace about

my neck and bangles on my arms that marked me as a woman.

I was numb as Perella and a host of smiling girls led me to a clearing beneath a giant ganyan tree. I might have been Shanalla then as my dress was taken from me. I did indeed have padded breasts. They tented the front of a silky, billowing dress that floated over the long underdress that I was wearing like a petticoat.

“She needs flowers in her hair, not beads,” said Sanna. I was forced to sit on a rickety chair and my hair was transformed. The girls seemed to think that they were dressing a doll as they weaved flowers of different colors in my hair after they had pulled away the beads. I had earrings attached to my ears, trembling as I thought how I had wished that I could be Shanalla again. It was what was happening to me. The thin shift that had come only to the tops of my thighs was covered by a new, sun-colored dress, hugging the top of me tightly and flaring out into a short skirt that had a petticoat inside it, one that swished noisily about me as I moved.

I remembered all the women chanting when I married my husband, Sebo. Here, among the Aravee, it was almost the same. I had to join the line of women and sway as they did, so many with flowers in their hair like mine, their faces made up, lip coloring on their mouths. I knew I wore that as well, and makeup, as they did.

I was Shanalla, I thought, with a little thrill as I remembered how my husband had had me as a woman on our wedding night. I had finally come around to being excited to be a woman. I had been a woman then, with a woman’s sexual equipment. Here, among the Aravee, I wasn’t a woman. I expected to be exposed

and humiliated in some awful ritual at any moment. But swaying and dancing like a woman was so feminizing. I loved the swirl of a dress about my legs. I had learned to love it so much in my previous experiences, living as a sissy, with breasts, or so I thought, for over six weeks.

The singing didn't stop as I was seated once more and gifted with all kinds of women's things, dresses, makeup, barettes, breast bands, panties, perfumes, earrings and polished stones, a form of jewellery.

I had to dance again with all of the younger girls. I was thinking that it was going on too long when I suddenly felt an arm grab me. It was the first tall warrior who had spoken to Sanna. A second man, just as tall, smiled and crossed the line of women, to stand on the other side of me from his brother.

Each man took one of my hands as I swayed in my high heels. There was nowhere that I could run. It took almost no time at all and I was a married woman. I was married to two men, Nothan and Grish, brothers to Perella, who seemed as excited as her brothers that I was now her sister as she kept calling me that.

"You don't have to take her to the wagon," said Perella.

"Where else would our wedding night take place?" asked Nothan, sweeping me up and carrying me as if I was a little girl.

"I think the youngest should have the first turn with our wife," said Grish.

"I get her first?" said Perella in mock excitement. "Oh, you are such kind, kind brothers."

"What does she say?" asked Grish then with a leer at me in his brother's arms.