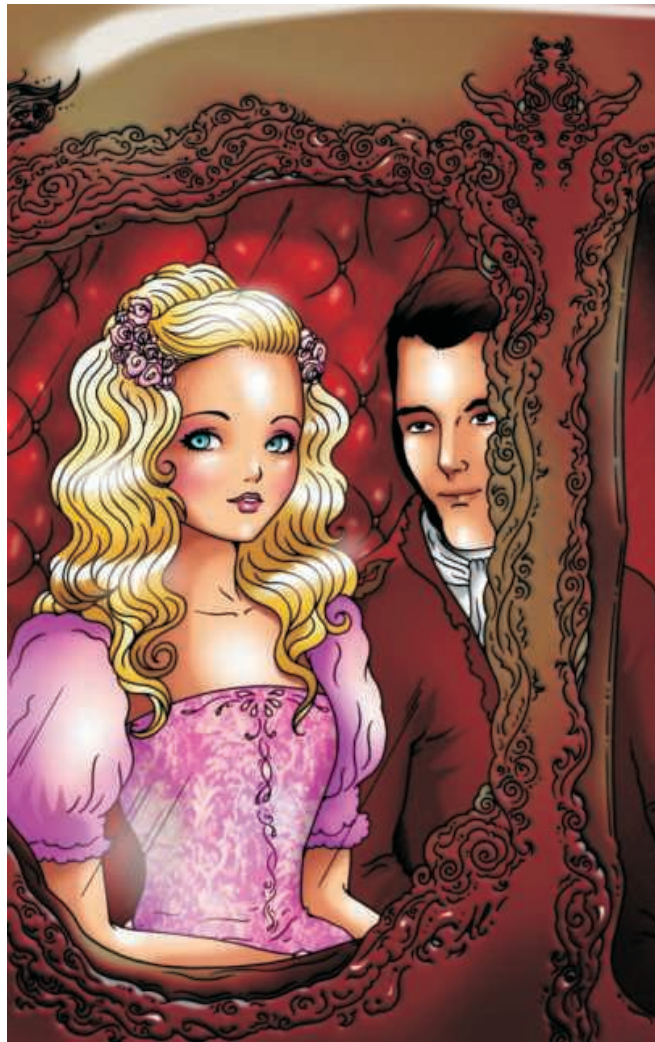




Reluctant Press presents:

My Lady of Sapphires

H. B. Kurtzwilde



AN 'ADULT TV' E-BOOK

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Reluctant Press TG Publishers

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My Lady of Sapphires

By H.B.Kurtzwilde

Since arriving at Grayson's Pottery, Suzanne Thatcher had been constantly impressed by how unremarkable she was. Since early childhood she had lived in fear of earning her own keep. The atmosphere in which she had been reared discouraged her from striking out on her own to see what she could make of herself. She had belatedly realized that she was surrendering her own freedom, one golden minute at a time.

Her nature would not allow her to settle for the status quo. Therefore she had taken a risk, seizing hold of what meager opportunity she could find. She had given up a great deal in the way of material security and social status when she stepped away from expectations. The world she had known before was closed to her now. For the first time, she began to know what happiness truly felt like.

Her new home had less money, dirtier streets, and far more people than she had imagined could fit together in so limited a space. But with numbers and poverty came anonymity. She had little reason to explain herself, and few bothered to ask where she had come from. All that mattered was her ability to do her job and obey her employer. It seemed little enough to give for her own independence.

She had parlayed her skills with brushes and paint into a spot at a crowded table of paintresses. With that position secured, she had found a small room for herself in a house full of laborers from all parts of the country. She woke each morning, donned her work dress, blundered through breakfast and joined the crowds that hurried off to tend the vast factories.

The bottle-shaped chimneys of the pottery kilns poured smoke out over the town. The smell was inescapable. Dirt and mud got in at every door. There was nothing to do but

scrape it off and remember that mud was her stock in trade. Suzanne spent her days as just another face among the black-dressed women, daubing paint on dishes intended for tables much finer than any she would ever grace.

At first indulged in childish dreams of charming one of the posh young gentlemen she saw about town. She had only to see the fine young ladies in their cold reserve and nervous helplessness to abandon the idea. Whatever had drained those women of their spark and spirit was nothing she wished to contend with.

The first few weeks in her new home went by in a blur of patterns, paints and new strokes of the brush, each of which she had to master perfectly. The merry girls around her were a wealth of tricks and gossip. Some of them petted and admired her for the elegant way she could write and figure. She spent a great deal of time listening to their idle chatter. By the time she understood that married women were not allowed to be painters, she was too comfortable in her good company to care.

Saturday mornings meant a lazy wash-up all over and tightening her corset strings so that she might fit the one fine dress she could call her own. The sprigged lawn was scattered with clusters of pink flowers, and the skirt came all the way down to the toes of her boots. On her head she put a straw hat decorated with a few narrow feathers. This was not nearly so fine as the ladies she had seen, but she had acquired the costume with her own honest labor and felt finer for that.

Dressed to step out, she secured a few small coins in a secret place and went to see what the local shopkeepers had found to tempt her girlish good taste. She left her savings in her room, so as not to be tempted to overindulge. Having money to both keep and spend filled her full of warmth and hope. She simply could not stay indoors with her mood so fine and high.

The brightness of the early autumn day was blunted by the lingering stench of the kiln chimneys. She took a handkerchief from her sleeve and breathed through it, trying to stifle the smell. She walked along the street, glancing in shop windows. She wasn't sure what she was looking for, but took pleasure in the mere act of seeking. At one street corner, she found a wizened old man selling roasted nuts.

She gave him a bright smile and then stepped off the sidewalk to take a better look at his wares. The scent of roasting chestnuts quite overpowered the smell of the factory. She asked the vendor for a packet, and stood watching him choose fat nuts to wrap in a cone of newspaper. She twisted from side to side, idly spinning her skirts about her legs while she waited.

At that moment, between one twist and the next, broad hands clamped about her waist and she was lifted off her feet. On her next breath her feet touched the sidewalk again, and her gasp became a scream. She swatted forcefully at the grasping hands, then fell still and silent as a carriage drawn by two proud horses clattered over the very place she had been standing.

The vendor was missed just barely. Had she not been moved, she wouldn't have been at all. Instantly her cries of reproach became gratitude. She clenched hard to the hands she had recently scorned, and turned shining eyes up to her happenstance benefactor.

"Thank you, good sir. I didn't hear a rumble in the way," she gasped, still breathless from the surprises the last minute had held.

"Thank you for not calling out the coppers," the tall, broad-shouldered man returned. "Though you still might call on that driver. If only we knew whose carriage that was!"

"Certainly it's no country custom to mix a lady with the pavement," Suzanne smartly replied. "I'll have to learn suspicion for these city horses."

"And city gentlemen," the vendor put in, tendering the packet to her with a wink and a grin.

Suzanne paid the vendor and made to turn away, but was stopped again by an unexpected grasp. She looked once more at her rescuer, and found him red-faced with some repressed emotion. Though she was tall for a lady, he was taller still, and she felt quite dwarfed by his intense regard.

"Do you come so newly to town that work has not found you?" he asked.

"Indeed no," she frowned. "I keep to the whistles of Grayson's paint shop. I thank you for your help, but I have secured my own position. Good day."

"But wait! You are a paintress then, and know something of art?" He pursued her doggedly, though she hurried her steps from this sudden imploring.

"I know of artfulness," she sharply replied. "Again, I thank you for your service, but not for this disgraceful pursuit."

"I only want your figure," the man all but cried. "Your proportions are perfection, though there is a flaw about the carriage that study must improve."

Suzanne stopped short, turned on him and stamped her foot. "If you mean to endear and scold in one breath, there are better streets than this for your suit. Go and find them, if you please."

The man looked startled, then glanced guiltily about the crowded road. He tipped his hat. "My apologies, in all respects. Of course you cannot understand my meaning. Another time, I'll make a more respectable entreaty."

"To another subject, I only pray," Suzanne said, then turned about and left him there.

She went on her way too fast and soon found herself breathless from surprise, fear, anger and exertion. Presently she came upon a shop boasting shining windows and a flock of dainty tables within. She made so bold as to enter, sighing happily at the scent of fragrant tea. A boy in a white apron offered her a place to sit, and brought to her a dish of black tea with milk and sugar.

As she sat refreshing herself with hot roasted nuts, all her high temper drifted away. Though she did not intend to dwell, her thoughts roved of their own over the face and manner of the man who had rescued, then accosted her. Both actions were equally bold; though she had fled, the impression lingered that the man had meant her no harm.

She sighed over her own rough treatment of his gallantry, and consoled herself with a second dish of tea. Perhaps she could have been less suspicious, but the surprise of the moment had quite undone her wits. Certainly a well-bred lady would not have scolded

her hero. But then, a gentlewoman would not have been on a street corner making purchases with her own wages.

She was distracted from her musings by the ring of the bell on the shop door and a tinkling of familiar voices. Turning on her chair, she found a trio of friendly faces. She quickly raised her hand to the serving boy to complete her table's number with this happy meeting.

Nellie, Alice and Bella were not sisters of blood, but of paint and gilding and pattern. They made merry greetings to their youngest sister-in-trade and flocked about her teapot, as bright doves to a scattering of crumbs. Each girl had a package from the nearby shops, and showed their little treasures with great pride.

"Have you nothing but nuts to show for your shopping?" Alice wondered. "You looked near to dropping when we saw you through the windows."

"I meant to find something charming, but adventure found me first," Suzanne explained. She recounted to them the wild harrowing she had gotten along with her chestnuts, then leaned her cheek against her palm. "Wasn't that funny of him, to chase after and remark on my person so boldly?"

The girls exchanged worried glances. Then Bella made a bright smile and gaily replied. "Was he handsome or frightful? That would make the difference to me!"

"Handsome," Suzanne confided. "Tall, dark and strong enough to move me from a standstill. That's no mean feat. But his eyes seemed kind, even if they were roving and green. Mother said green eyes are of a lusty nature, so perhaps I was too confused to tell true."

At this description, the others fell silent and exchanged cautious looks among themselves. Then Nellie gave a decisive nod and turned to Suzanne in all seriousness.

"That must have been Anthony Nicks," Nellie pronounced. "He's a sculptor for Mister Greyson's shop."

"The sculptor," Bella corrected. "Designer and colorist too, of the figures and such."

"You mean he invents the patterns we paint?" Suzanne gasped and felt faint once more.

"Hardly," Alice scoffed. "Our brushes never touch the works he creates. They're too fine for us. I can paint a bouquet near as well as life, but he... oh... he makes clay look ready to walk about the glens."

"He's not so much," Nellie contradicted. "But if you see him again, you'll do better to remember your livelihood depends on his genius. Old Greyson banks on his fancies to keep the dishes rolling out the door."

"Well, isn't that just like me?" Suzanne fretted, then made a comical, despairing expression. "Ungrateful and clumsy, every inch of me!"

The others laughed and turned the discussion to other matters, but Suzanne hadn't the heart to follow well. Her thoughts were a tumult, all of them swirling around Anthony Nicks.

Five days was plenty to stop the endless, self-doubting recollections of the Adventure with Chestnuts. Four of those were spent in contemplation of cups, plates and bowls, the flowers and figures thereon, and the delicate scrolls of gilding that made their beauty more delightful. Suzanne had quite put from her thoughts the connection between rescue and the patterns she rendered so patiently with her crafty brush.

She might better have forgotten that the sun rose, and occasionally was known to shine. But her part in the artistic flourishes of the pottery was, to her mind, a small one. She had no knowledge whence her plates had come, nor thither they would go after her loving care. Nor did she make so bold as to enter among the dainty shops that made so much of her handiwork. Though she had a keen eye for ornament, and a steady mind to create perfect imitations of art, the repetition of the patterns seemed as mystical as the invocation of holy texts. She knew the way it was done, and carried on without question.

She was but one faithful devotee among dozens who sat in rows among the sacred paints, heads bowed under sunny windows, brushes making constant reverence to the work. A glance left or right showed her a remarkable thing: she fit here, and drew no notice. That simple fact was her chief satisfaction in life, to have found a place where she would not be thought eccentric and strange.

The factory whistle divided her day. The low, unobtrusive murmurs of her companions ticked minutes by, in their odd convent of turpentine and oil paint incense. No intrusions were permitted to distract from their devotions. Here, Suzanne felt quite safe, not only from the heartless city street, but from the wildness she still hoped to subdue within herself.

It was a shock to her cheerful diligence, then, when the double-doors at the end of the room banged wide open. Hers was not the only head that rose and fixed upon a flock of clay-spattered men who were so daring as to invade this convent of craftswomen. Even as the workmen advanced, the shop mistress came to impede their progress.

At the center of the flurry was a man Suzanne only knew as her benefactor and employer. Mister Grayson was a wide, ruddy man of more than forty years. Though his workday clothes were well-made, they were as bespattered as those of his lessers. The gang of men stopped as Missus Knotts took up a scolding tone with Mister Grayson himself.

"Shortcutting through the paint shop are we, Sir?" Missus Knotts inquired in a businesslike tone. "If my girls and I take a stroll through the pot works, I imagine the disturbance would be equally intolerable."

"I need a girl," one of the men replied.

"Don't come hunting doxies in my shop, and we'll not find husbands in yours," Missus Knotts coolly returned.

"Not just any girl. One in particular, and you have her," the man replied. "Otherwise I wouldn't have dared the dragon's lair. You see I've brought good yeomen to defend me."

The men chuckled, Missus Knotts sputtered, and Suzanne quickly returned to the ring of posies she had begun to apply to a saucer.

"You've run off some nice model again," Missus Knotts presently accused. "No doubt by requiring something vulgar for your fanciful figures."

At that, every girl tittered, each of them scandalized and thrilled by their protector's bold tone.

"I'll thank you not to call my designs and your livelihood 'vulgar,' Missus Knotts," Anthony Nicks calmly informed her.

"Some are not mere vulgarity," Missus Knotts pretended to agree. "Many go straight to clear and obvious obscenity."

"We came not for your opinion, but for a young lady," Mister Greyson halted their bickering. "Just a moment of your time, please, so that she may be discovered."

"A moment? If she is missed at the tables, even just one girl, we'll be hopelessly behind before long," Missus Knotts continued to object.

Anthony left Greyson to deal with his taskmistress. Suzanne did her best to focus only on her work, but belatedly realized this diligence made her conspicuous. The other girls were taking in the argument like fine entertainment. Suzanne put her brushes down again and turned her eyes towards the high, shining windows. Nevertheless, Anthony stopped at her table and stood staring.

"Found her," Anthony said in a low, enraptured tone. "I was sure I heard her right. This will save a great many mistakes, if she will come along."

"She has a name," Suzanne told the windows. "And she is quite content to stay among the dragons, where she belongs."

"Don't be such a goose," Anthony chided. "Up and come along, if you please. Your master has better use for you in another shop."

"Thank you, but you're asking the impossible," Suzanne replied. "I have a very little skill with paints. Nothing more of mine is offered, convivial as the request may be."

"Sensible girl," Missus Knotts approved.

"She's about to sensibly deny herself a great deal more in pay than this position can give her," Greyson harrumphed. He walked down the center aisle, every inch the lord and master of his domain. The steely eye of a man used to obedience fell on her. "Come along, dear. We mean you no harm. I will not permit my paintresses to be casually and publicly disgraced, as you seem to assume."

Alice learned over to Suzanne and whispered. "Might be best to go. Nicks isn't a threat to women anyway. He's a bachelor in the French style."

Suzanne rose from her seat but slowly, feeling every eye in the room on her. The statue-like height with which she had been blessed seemed a great oppression to her then, and her steps sounded unnaturally loud in that still, silent shop. Mister Greyson offered his arm in a fatherly way; with fingers numb with shock, she took hold of him. As he escorted her back the way he had come, the men around him fell again to babbling of clays and ornaments as though speaking in a foreign tongue.

She had previously known the doors they passed through only as the place her dishes came from. Now she saw that it led into a great storehouse of wares ready for decoration. As they passed through the aisle, she stared in wonder at the vast quantities of half-finished works. Surely there was not enough paint in the entire world to adorn so much fine pottery.

Soon enough they passed out into the courtyard, beneath the soot of the kiln. She saw men in various stages of filth going to and fro about the place. The open windows at another shop showed her men and boys at wheels, or pouring slip into moulds, making shapes fit for the fires and the Grayson name.

Beyond the throwing shop was a tall, classically styled brick building. To this she was led, and taken up a staircase of polished wood. Niches in the walls held delicate figures of such fine fashioning they seemed too delicate for human hands. Some were of fanciful animals, or showed flowers forever locked in perfect bloom. Others gave impressions of classical scenes, wherein fauns and satyrs, gods and goddesses, nymphs and youths went about their pastoral pleasures, oblivious to their observers.

At the third landing, Greyson steered her down a hallway to a polished wooden door, which Anthony unlocked with a key at his waist. Within, there was a clutter of paintings and fragments of sculpture quite at odds with the regimented order of the pottery. Damp clothes obscured lumps on a range of worktables. A desk was thickly littered with drawings and other papers. The remains of a meal stood discarded on a tea table by the window. A tall Chinese screen painted in black and gold blocked off one corner of the room.

"Now then," Greyson said, addressing himself to Suzanne once more. "Mister Nicks will see to you suitably. You may take him at his word. So no more of that brash temper, if you please."

"If I don't please, may I go back to Missus Knotts?" Suzanne timidly inquired.

"You'd better just try to please," Greyson sternly informed her. "Mister Nicks is a respectable gentleman, so be a good girl. There's a dear. Nicks, those maquettes won't wait, so no more pickiness out of you, either."

Greyson went away then, taking his flock of lackeys along. Suzanne folded her hands before her skirts and peered curiously about the place, quite overwhelmed by this sudden turn in her fate.

"You said you had a name," Anthony reminded. "What is it?"

"Suzanne Thatcher," she supplied. "The girls in the shop said you were Anthony Nicks, and an artist."

"True on both accounts," he agreed. "Come here, I have something remarkably vulgar and obscene to show you. If you don't faint dead away, I think you'll do nicely as my model."

Suzanne approached his desk and took in the sketches he had ranged about. She recognized the figures. Diana of the Hunt and her little dog; Aphrodite stepping from the foam; Hera in her fiercest aspect; Athena in a warrior-wise pose of thoughtfulness. The renderings were quite fine, though vague in certain details, as well as rather spare in costume.

"Which of these am I to be?" she quietly inquired.

"All of them," Anthony said. "As all women are all goddesses. You think yourself unable to do this task, but do not fear. To me, you're a grain of sand that will not be brushed from my thoughts. And so I must cherish you, and slowly make lustrous what once seemed a mere irritation."

"I think you hope too much of me," Suzanne said, and began to back away. "I'm merely tall and strong. Nothing like these sylphs of dreams and stories."

"True. Compared to you, these are nothing like what I intend to create," Anthony said. "To succeed, I must impose on your modesty, and have your assistance. Are you afraid of what I'm asking?"

"No," Suzanne frankly replied. "If you peek past my modesty, you'll find something that will rather spoil your plans."

"On the contrary," Anthony said. "I see what you try to hide. I see it in your walk, your eyes...but I can change all that. If only you allow me. Shall we begin?"

Suzanne stood behind the Chinese screen dithering over her buttons while Anthony made a ruckus in the studio beyond. There was a tap at the door, a murmured exchange, then Anthony's hands thrust a charming red-painted vanity set behind the screen.

She took the tray and set it on the table beside a tall oval mirror. The pitcher was nearly brimful of steaming hot water. Soft towels and soap stood beside the basin. There was also a straight-edged razor and fluffy shaving brush standing in a mug. Suzanne looked these items over and returned to the business of her innumerable buttons.

"I want you to shave everywhere," Anthony announced in a casual way. "There must be nothing between me and the fine details of your skin. Don't let modesty stop your thoroughness, my dear."

"I still think you're in for rather a shock," Suzanne said.

"I think you are, dear girl."

Suzanne hurried out of her dress and petticoats, corsets and stockings and bloomers. She stood before the mirror, perfectly nude, but her arms and hands reflexively moved to cover those parts of herself that she found unladylike. There was no way to shave in such a pose, so she looked away from the mirror. She focused on her task and soon was spreading a generous lather everywhere her golden hair lay thick and glittering against her flesh.

"I assume you don't wish for me to be bald?" Suzanne called out to Anthony.

"Indeed, no," he chuckled. "Though wigs might be used later, to model different colors and textures."

"Very well," Suzanne agreed, then fell silent again as she made her cheeks smooth with the straight razor.

She took a long time to smooth the curve of her breast, and the narrow line that descended from her navel, down her belly and to the thick patch between her thighs. The warm water trickled from the razor's edge. She caught her lip in her teeth, taking gentle

care about the base of her recumbent phallus and over the tender ovals that descended, pink and sensitive, beneath it. Then she sat upon a low stool to shave her legs silky clean.

Though it seemed an unnecessarily particular detail, she parted her legs and shaved the furrow between her buttocks, then stood and rinsed away the remainders of the foam. Patting her damp skin dry with a soft towel, she turned her back to the mirror and looked at herself in reverse. From that angle, she fancied that she saw what Anthony was looking for in his art.

"Here, put this on," Anthony said, pushing a carton under the screen. "I'm nearly ready out here, so hurry on please."

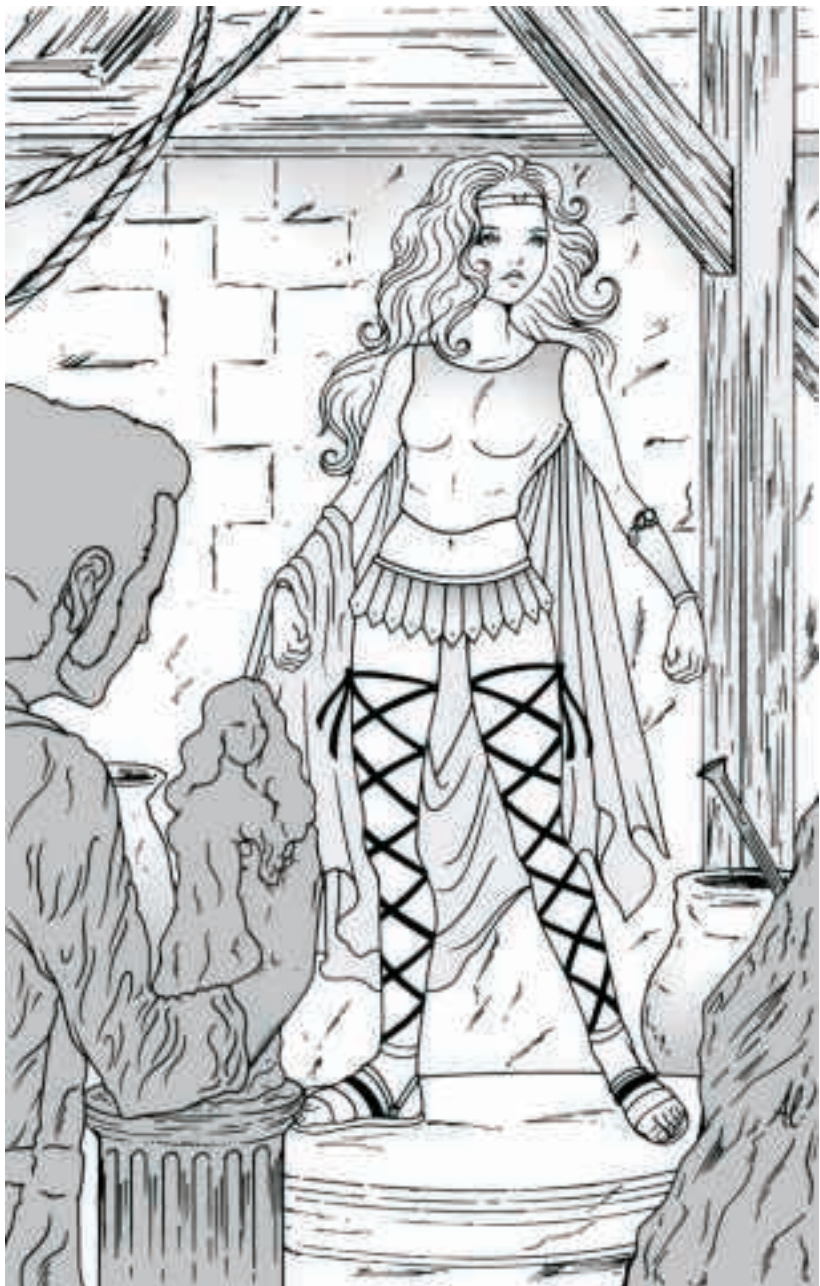
Suzanne stooped and took up a breastplate, the golden color of which was dull and scratched. There were gold-colored laces up the back, and the various pieces of chilly metal cinched in as she drew the strings tight. A very short skirt of leather and painted metal she girded about her hips, conscious of how exposed this left her pale legs. Upon her feet she put flat sandals and carefully criss-crossed long thongs up her calves, to tie just at the middle of her thighs. Gilded bracers for her arms finished the costume, or so she thought. A narrow, golden tiara sat in the bottom of the carton.

"Who am I supposed to be?" she asked her reflection.

"Athena," Anthony replied.

"Then give me a helm," Suzanne said. "That silly crown won't do at all. Save that for Aphrodite."

There was another great rummaging. She was given a helm with red cockscomb above and an open face instead of the tiara. Suzanne put it on, arranged her golden curls in a tumble down her back, then stepped from behind the



screen before she could hesitate.

"Ah!" Anthony smiled at her, genuinely pleased. "Yes! Well... no... nearly there."

He advanced on her quickly and thrust both hands down the top of her armor. Confident fingers grasped at the soft flesh, lifting and arranging, and exciting all at once. She gasped, tried to step back, but he released his hold and smiled more brightly.

"There you are, lovely lady. Now, up on the box and I'll get you a spear," Anthony said. "I'll need it to make the figure stand steady on the base."

Suzanne looked around for a box and found he meant a rather tall platform arranged before the wide windows.

"Won't people see me?" she frowned.

"One day, formed of clay, but not through this third floor window," Anthony cheerfully replied. "Though the sense of exposure may take some getting used to."

Suzanne shinnied up onto the high platform and turned to take both a shield and a spear from him. He climbed up as well, but stayed kneeling before her. He took hold of her feet, posing her in one stance after another, testing the curve of her toes with his thumb.

"You're to be pointing with the spear, not throwing it," he hurried to explain. "A leader of armies is what I wish to see. Tense your legs, let your muscle stand proudly... yes... yes..."

His hands strayed up her legs, arranged the armored skirts and went on up to set her spine to the slightly twisting angle he desired. He raised her spear arm to direct imaginary forces and let her shield arm hang easily at her side. A lift of chin, an adjustment to helm and hair, then he gave a satisfied nod and hopped down once more.

"There, I was right," Anthony said, triumphant. "Strength and beauty are such a rare combination. I'm lucky it was not lost over a packet of chestnuts."

Suzanne blushed rosily, but kept still in her pose. "Lucky for us both. Bad luck for whatever lady was meant for this job in the first place."

"This was meant for none but you," Anthony said in a conspiratorial kind of way. "Oh, I had planned his collection, but had no inspiration to continue. And then... serendipity."

"You like to flatter me," Suzanne observed. "I wish you wouldn't. Whatever you make of me will either not resemble at all, or not sell at all."

"It might be worse than that," Anthony admitted. "Greyson might not like it and then it never sees the light of day. But you have sunlight in your hair now, and the stern expression that so bewitched me. If you worry that I may find fault with your figure, the remedy lies in my own hands."

"You're a strange man," Suzanne observed. "The girls say you're still a bachelor and harbor... shocking tastes."

"Ah, gossip," Anthony sighed. He retreated to his worktable where a lump of wax stood ready for his work. He took up his tools and began to shape the block of blue paraffin. "It is true that I philander among those who indulge in la vice Angelis, but I am

equally a cad amongst the doxies and opera-singers. My truest immorality is adoring my work above all human creatures."

"I have never before heard a bounder and a cad admit to his condition," Suzanne coolly returned. "How do you manage to cultivate the virtue of honesty among your other pursuits?"

"I'd rather be an honest villain than the kind of lispng, dissipated dilettante that goes at his own ruin by halves," Anthony said, offering a charming smile. "Lower your spear. I want the butt end on the floor. It will weigh on you less, and give the balance I require."

Suzanne gratefully rested her spear, somewhat surprised that she had raised it. "So you find a sort of honor in being a rascal around the clock, rather than in the cover of darkness alone?"

"If I followed the usual career, I would already be wed," Anthony said, scraping wax away from the block at a great rate. "I would be busily deceiving my bride and my unfortunate offspring, spoiling her reputation and reducing all involved to a laughingstock. I only ruin myself."

"But your ruination is sure to be total," Suzanne said. "Have you no thought of redemption?"

"My work is my only hope, and my love," Anthony said. "If you need a reason to excuse your dishabille before me, rest assured you do a great deal to improve an unblushing wretch."

Suzanne opened her mouth to scold his behavior, then realized she had not a leg to stand on. If she were made to give an honest accounting of her history, there was a great deal of self-service behind her choices. There had simply come a day when good opinion and self-denial had no longer held her to the drudging pursuit of what was expected. Abandoning those common expectations had given her the only unblemished happiness she had ever known.

She stood as still as she could, but kept her eyes fixed on Anthony as he scraped, cut and shaped the wax block. At first, he glanced up frequently, offering rakish grins or half-murmured reassurances. Eventually, his eyes became very still, his brow smoothed and an innocent smile took the false expression from his lips. The next time he glanced up, she could tell he wasn't really seeing her any more.

Anthony dropped to one knee, a small tool grasped delicately in his fingers. The wooden handle guided not a brush, but a thin wire, through the wax. The shape of the block kept her from seeing what he rendered. Though he glanced up more frequently as he worked, Suzanne felt his regard was both benign and thrilling. The deeper he fell into communion with his creation, the more pure love shone in his eyes when he looked up at her.

"You're beautiful," he murmured. If the room hadn't been so silent, the words might have gone completely unnoticed.

"Did you mean your Athena?" Suzanne softly inquired.

"My Athena will never live," Anthony said, as if to explain himself. "Her heart will never beat, and so I may give my love to her with impunity."