



Reluctant Press presents:

Lady Caroline

Philippa Peters



ILLUSTRATIONS BY C. HAIGHT

A 'NEW WOMAN' E-BOOK

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Reluctant Press TG Publishers

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THE MAKING OF LADY CAROLINE

by **Philippa Peters**

I. CONTRACTED

The Director did not look up from reading my report on the loss of mining profits on Ruby Gamma. Typical, I thought sourly, as I stared at her immaculate red hair. She was over one hundred and twenty years old, looked about thirty, and still she played power games with an underling like me.

“Oh, do sit down,” she said, indicating a plushie beside her desk. As if anyone in her position could be so nonchalant or absent-minded.

I sat, easing myself into the welcome embrace of the comfort chair.

“Third time for you,” said the Director.

It took me a moment to realize what she meant. I had been employed as a special contractor thirty times by Internal Security but, yes, this was the third time I had endured bi-osculting. It had been necessary as the Gamma miners had all come from one genetic stock that favored red hair and beards. I would have been out-of-place as my original self, a very ordinary, brown-haired, brown-eyed member of the masses.

“Yes, milady,” I agreed with her. “But, as you can see, I am in my own body now.”

I could have stayed a red-haired, overmuscled Rubian, and gotten a lot more girls. But I preferred my mousier exterior even though the medtechs always laughingly complained when I went back to my original form. It helped me in my occupation. I was an investigator, a detective by nature. I found it easier to solve my cases when I was underrated by the opposition.

In the Nebula Kingdom, biosculpture was common among all classes of people save for the very poor. It was expensive but since life-prolonging drugs were also common, why should anyone waste one hundred and thirty years of life in a shape or facial image not pleasing to the world? It meant, of course, that we had an aristocracy of uniformly thin-faced, big-eyed, aquiline-nosed, firm-jawed, blonde-haired people.

There were, however, many people like me who lived their lives with no other alterations than those that came with fashion and the very slow aging process that the life-prolonging drugs gave. After all, with genetic birth selection and nanotechnology, it really was unheard of for anyone to be born in a rich society like that of the Nebula Kingdom with any defects. Beauty and handsomeness were such commonalities that no one remarked on them. You had to get out on the Frontier if you wanted to see an ugly, obese or gross-looking human being.

"We have a very tough case," said Lady Myra Colach, Director of Internal Security for the Nebula Kingdom and my last employer. She was always that way once we got past the power game of hers, demonstrating that she was in charge by making me wait for her attention. "We have had a leak in nanotechnology science."

I shrugged. Industrial espionage went on all the time. We stole from the Terrans for the wars we were still fighting all across the Nebula. The Terrans sold advanced tech to our enemies, the Shelter Republics, who bought what they couldn't steal, and so they kept up with the advances the War Office was continually developing.

"You do understand nanotech transformations?" queried the Director.

I did. They were enormously expensive and could be extremely painful. While biosculpting was only skin deep and had to be renewed, nanotech transformations were at the root level, so to speak. Inject the correctly programmed nannies and even your bones would turn to mush as they were rearranged to your newly desired height or configuration. Soft tissue would be changed and refitted to the altered bone structure. Only idiots who had to look like a hologram star, and owned a king's ransom, would want to undertake such a transformation.

"We think one of the Republics has stolen the whole technology," said Lady Myra. "Not just theoretics, but every instrument and device that we use, including a nanotech production plant."

"Well," I said. "Any technology only lasts so long." It was a maxim of the Nebula Kingdom Government. It accounted for the continual pressure to do more, to move on and experiment. Rewards were given for scientific achievement, including access to the aristocracy. It made the Kingdom the most lively and exciting place in the galaxy.

"There were only four places in the galaxy capable of nanotech transformation," said Lady Myra, her violet eyes fixing on my face. I noted the 'were' and sat up straighter. "The two we have are military installations. Berenger and Terra have vanity facilities but don't let that title fool you. Both governments control the security of those facilities with an iron fist. Imagine if you will, someone the exact image of King William walking onto a Hammer-class battleship and ordering its admiral to bombard Congreve, say." Congreve was the home to some of the Kingdom's most persistent enemies, exiles from the Kingdom itself. "Well, something like that has happened."

“King William has been replicated?” I asked in astonishment.

Lady Myra smiled. “Not that, thank goodness,” she said. “Lord Shipley, however, has been assassinated.”

She got up from her desk, poured me a shot of lifewater and took a glass of the green liquor for herself, too.

“You found the killer?” I asked as I sipped on the bittersweet mixture. It was concocted from squid-like sea creatures, distilled exclusively on the water world of Metaxa. Lifewater was its only source of income and Metaxa was ‘protected’ in its monopoly by the Nebula Kingdom, which also had a huge military base in the system’s asteroid belt.

“The killer was Lord Shipley,” she said cryptically. “But he was hurt when he assassinated himself. A quick-thinking aide stunned him right away and got the two bodies to the Royal Hospital. Needless to say, the blood scans and genetic markers showed that the dead man was Shipley and the live man was his nanotech-transformed double.

“Now, I have the best, most thorough, police and military intelligence service in the known galaxy. Three months of intensive investigation has only brought us this far. The assassin was not produced in the Military, on Terra or on Berenger. The head of Nanotech Research at the Royal Hospital explained it to me most carefully in his jail cell. There are certain markers in the nannies that reveal where they were produced. The assassin’s nanomarkers were from Royal. But that was impossible with the records they have kept.”

“You say the assassin lived?” I asked.

The Director grimaced. “We injected him with truth drugs and he had an extremely adverse reaction.”

“He’s dead,” I said and she nodded, watching me. “So you examined him and found out what?”

“He was a frontier mongrel,” said the Director flatly. “Before the nanotech transformation, he would have been a natural. No lifer drugs. Nothing.”

“And you want me to find what the galaxy’s best intelligence service can’t?” I asked.

She smiled. “You just got drafted,” she said.

I stiffened. I was too old to be drafted. I had just had my sixtieth birthday, though I know I looked like a ‘natural’ twenty-two or -three.

“At the usual rates,” she said.

I relaxed. “This assassin,” I said. “Was he intended to replace Lord Shipley?”

“We think so,” she said, pressing a button on her desk. She flipped the recorder that had appeared on the desk to me. “So we asked, if he was, was he the first?”

That jolted me. Nanotech doubles all over the place? Who could you trust?

“We’ve been running tests on everyone we can in any position of importance and we are still going on, sweeping the military,” she said. “We found four, the highest placed being my superior.” She smiled as I gaped at her. “From testing the corpses, and the Shipley assassin, their disease antibodies suggest they all spent time on Carmichael, a backwater planet. I want you there with those sharp eyes and ears you’ve always shown. I want the

source of the assassins, I want the machines, I want the people who are doing the scientific work and I want the traitors who sold them our technology.”

II. DECEIVED

I protested but I had to give in, in the end. At my height, I would have stuck out on Carmichael, a planet that had just recently begun to make technological purchases from Terra that indicated a great increase in wealth. Colach’s experts had found nothing to account for such good fortune. It was a likely spot to begin even if it was six months away.

Six months that I would spend mostly asleep being transformed into a ‘frontier mongrel’. I was to be awakened on Frank, the medtech who gave me the last injections told me curtly, a notorious Hub station where civilized and uncivilized worlds met on the edge of the frontier.

Awakening was an agony. I could hear the soothing voice of a female medtech who seemed to have accompanied me on station, me still in a medshell. I could understand that. Better for me that no one recognize me. Better for me that no one would see me leaving the fast, military courier on which I had travelled. I would have agreed if I had been conscious.

I was blind as I stumbled, naked, out of the warm security of the medshell. “Hold on, dear,” came that soothing, lilting, female voice. “I just have to unplug you.”

I shivered in the cold as I felt cords and piping sliding across me.

“There,” she said and a hand under my elbow guided me through blinding whiteness into a bathroom area and then a cascade of warm water hit me. When the water poured over my face, I realized that I didn’t have a beard as I expected. That made me a little cross. I felt like I had been dragged through a sewer behind stampeding riverbucks and they hadn’t even tagged my nannies correctly to give me a six-month beard. The men of Carmichael didn’t shave once they were adult. I would stand out if I didn’t go in there with at least a little stubble on my face. On Carmichael, they kept both their hair and their beards short but most men wore both.

Marissa, as the medtech called herself, swathed me in a robe, giving me mouth cleaners and then, drops for my eyes. My hair was wrapped tightly in a towel, like a turban. My hair seemed awfully long to be going to a place like Carmichael. I became aware as I sat on a commode, and Marissa began to dry my long hair, that I wasn’t myself. The nanotech transformation had taken place.

I tried to open my eyes and look at myself but I couldn’t see well in the brightness of the room. I did catch a glimpse of someone else and realized that I was not alone. I saw a young woman working on another young woman away from me, drying her long, honey-gold hair.

I stood when Marissa asked me and swallowed a cool, soothing drink that made my burning throat ease much. The voice was always the last thing to come back, Vanyon, the doctor who had explained the process at Royal, had told me. I had a vision then of the pretty girl standing across from me. I tried to smile at her and she tremulously smiled back at me. It looked like we were both recovering from medical traumas.

It didn't occur to me to question why she was in the same station as me or why I had a female medtech attending me. As it was, through slitted eyes, I could see that the girl had dark, heavily fringed lashes and bright blue eyes despite her fair hair. Then, Marissa took my robe from me at the same time as the medtech attending the girl took her robe from her.

I couldn't follow why that medtech turned her to face me as Marissa was turning me also so that I could see her lovely breasts and her narrow waist, her wide hips and hairless, shapely legs. Just a little tuft of honey blonde hair between her legs spoiled her soft and baby smooth skin.

"See," said Marissa and the dark-haired medtech opposite her seemed to say the same thing though I couldn't hear her. "The nannies worked perfectly."

The medtech opposite said the same thing. She raised the girl's hand as Marissa raised mine and we touched hands, hers long and soft, her nails clean and manicured, a girl's hand. I touched a mirror.

What was a mirror doing between us? I wondered, and then the medtech in the mirror said from behind me, "I should really get you into a bra and panties in case someone else comes in."

She let me go and I staggered as the girl opposite me was let go and staggered, too. Then I felt the movement on my chest and I looked down in amazement. My hair fell about my smooth face and my breasts. Yes, I had breasts. My eyes went lower and something was missing. Comprehension flooded through me. I stared dumbfounded and appalled at my reflection in the mirror and she stared back at me, as dumbfounded and appalled as I was.

I was a woman! The nannies had turned me into a woman.

I turned to look at Marissa who was smiling at me as she started to put a bra over my shoulder.

"I'm a woman," I croaked, forcing words through my painful throat.

"Of course you are," she said brightly. Then she must have seen the panic in my brand new blue eyes. "Didn't they tell you?"

III. BETRAYED

I wasn't *completely* a woman. I think Marissa was trying to console me or something as she explained what had gone on with my penis and my genitals, how they were still there, shrunken. It had been a simple biosculpting procedure, she explained, that there had been no need to awaken me for, to fold and tuck everything away neatly and leave me with the appearance of female genitalia.

"It will be very easy to reverse," she said brightly as I sat shaking in a woman's bra and panties, my long hair cascading over my shoulders.

"I didn't sign on for this," I said stupidly.

"You didn't?" she asked, turning to the outer door at the sound of the communication chimes.

"Lieutenant Taggart and briefing party," said a male voice.

"Taggart?" Marissa asked, turning to me after inspecting the entrance vid. There was more than one person there but all were in naval uniform. "Do you know a Taggart?"

I shook my head. Big mistake. Ringlets of curly, blonde hair fell over my bare shoulders and face setting me off to convulsive shivering which only made the light, tickling sensations increase.

"Well, better see them," Marissa said, handing me a white, frilly robe that was silky to touch. It only made my shaking worse to realize it was a female's robe and I had to free my hair and push it over my back to fit the robe about me. I looked down at my figure and pulled the robe about my legs as I sat again, shocked and totally dismayed at what had been done to me. I was no pervert, like the inhabitants of Shalimar Station, who advertized 'fantasy' holidays as biosculpted video stars of the opposite sex. I did not want to see myself as a woman.

The chimes called again. "All right, all right!" said Marissa, pressing a key on the comm unit that released the door lock. The three men came in like a well-trained commando insertion team, which I suppose they were.

Marissa didn't have a chance and I was too groggy to do more than squeak as she was killed expertly and quickly by the man with the nametag, 'Lt. E. Taggart', on his chest. He smiled as he pushed the heated cutter-beam against my robe. I thought I was dead, too, but he only smiled at me, his finger resting easy by the discharge tab.

One of the people was reprogramming the console I could see. The entry of the three men was being spun backwards and then a new program from a databox he had inserted into the dataport was added. I had done that often myself and his equipment looked right up-to-date, Nebula Security issue.

The third person who came in was Marissa. She went right into the bathroom and whisked out the medshell.

"Very well," she said in Marissa's voice. "I'm back to His Majesty's ship, *Vituperance*." That was the ship I had arrived on. "Package delivered on time." She smiled at me as she said it. Numbly, I watched her depart.

The console engineer spread out a large bag on the floor and thrust the real Marissa's body into it. The smell of scorched flesh seemed to recede as he closed the tabs over her body. All the time, 'Lt. E. Taggart' pressed the cutter under my breast, staring into my eyes and studying every line on my face from my full lips to my narrow eyebrows and thick eyelashes.

Two more men entered. One was dressed like a station servicer, in green uniform with 'Frank Personnel' stencilled everywhere on him. He whisked the bag with the body away. Taggart then pulled back from me and I gasped at the last man to enter the room. I knew him!

I was supposed to be John McDonald, an itinerant communications worker from Carmichael, currently at work for the Kingdom, two years away by the fastest courier, in the

Metaxa system where he had been at work for the last ten years as a civilian contractor. I was supposed to be this McDonald, homesick and coming back to Carmichael, looking for work. Now I looked up and McDonald was looking down at me.

“Lovely,” he said, staring at me. I clenched my teeth and my jaw hurt as I felt awful at the words. Men did not describe other men, not a man like me, as ‘lovely.’

“We should kill him,” said Taggart and fright began to take over again as I looked up at him.

“No,” said John McDonald, smiling the crooked grin that I had studied so hard before I had been over come with the agony of the transformation and had thankfully been shelled. “Sutcliffe has to see this one. He won’t believe it otherwise.”

He ordered me to dress and supervised every item I put on. He insisted I put on stockings, watching avidly as I slid the flesh-colored items over my smooth, hairless legs. He found a dainty, female undergarment, I think they called it a teddy, and I had to put it on, leaving off my robe and hearing a gasp of appreciation from the tech as he looked at me. I was flaming in heat and embarrassment as I put on the garment. Then McDonald had me put on a fashionable dress just like any young girl might have worn.

The bodice hugged my figure tightly, even more so when McDonald tightened up the cords at the back and my breasts were almost forced out at the front. Short, silky skirts swirled over my hips and about my legs, dancing and caressing me just like my hair. I had worn costumes before on investigations. But that was nothing like this. I was jiggling everywhere and the tech was looking at me with hungry eyes.

I couldn’t walk in the high-heeled boots McDonald put on my feet and he cursed me while the tech tittered. “Take small steps,” McDonald fumed at me as I wondered if I could ‘accidentally’ fall into Taggart and get the cutter away from him.

“You need makeup and jewellery,” said John McDonald, spraying me with a cloying female perfume that made me want to gag, “but first and a little on account.” He kissed me. He put his arms on my bare shoulders, tilted me back and kissed me full on my new, full lips. His soft beard tickled my cheek and chin.

I yelped and pulled back, struggling in the grip of a taller man, who was much stronger than I was. He smiled at me. It was a smile I had practised often. “Ah, my little Caroline,” he said with a sigh. “Is that any way to treat your future husband?”

Taggart snorted behind him and the techie gasped. John McDonald just smiled at me and tried to hug me as I squirmed in his grip and tried to attack him, even in the rustly dress and with my chest bobbing.

“You see, Dar,” he said over his shoulder to the tech. “You could take Taggart here. Run him through the Nannie Hospital and he could be just like this one. Then you’d have to tame him as I’m going to do with this one and then she will be the most loving of all your wives. You’ll want her in your bed every night, as I shall have my lovely Caroline.”

I knew why he was talking like that. It was a technique I used myself. Just by being matter-of-fact and conversational about terrible things, you can terrify even the most hardened criminals. John McDonald was very good at the technique. He was terrifying me. The

way the tech slavered and drooled at me was really scary as well as he didn't seem to be acting.

"Hold her," McDonald said to the other two men and they came and took my arms. "She has to wear some makeup," he said. I still struggled and suddenly he came behind me, lifted my skirts and smacked my ample bottom. It stung and the men laughed as I let loose a torrent of unladylike language.

I didn't have a hope. I was leaned over a chair and my bottom was soundly spanked. My hair cascaded all over my face as if I was in a shower as John McDonald paddled me. And he didn't stop. I kept thinking he would but he didn't. I gritted my teeth and I don't know why but I started to cry. I never cry.

"Hey, John," said Taggart in disgust. "Why don't we just rape her?" I felt a hard, calloused hand on my aching buttocks. "She's got the equipment for frontal as well as rear engagements, doesn't she?"

He kept exaggerating the feminine pronouns. I was given more stinging blows and then suddenly pulled up straight by my hair. My rear ached even worse now that no one was beating on me. McDonald smoothed my skirts about me and I had to grimace at the soft touch of silk on my wounded backside. He leaned forward and kissed my neck and then studied me as I shuddered and looked back murderously at him.

"Much better," he said. "See," he said to the others. "She didn't attack me this time."

McDonald held out a lipstick to me. "You have to put this on," he said. "No self-respecting girl, which is what you are, would go anywhere without it."

I got to look in a mirror. I couldn't believe the beautiful girl in the mirror was me. But she pursed her lips as I was doing; John McDonald's hand on my back suggested I had better. He loomed behind me, putting his arm about my tight-bodied waist. I couldn't believe the cleavage I had and it was all hanging out there for anyone to see. The dress he had made me wear had seen to that.

McDonald made me carry a shoulder purse in which he put the lipstick, perfume spray, other articles of women's makeup, an ID card and money. He put a woman's frilly, sequinned jacket about me. Dar, the tech, ran a new program and I was tugged after McDonald into the hallway. It led to lifts that went up and down the huge, fifteen-story glass frontage of the Maidenflower Inn.

Taggart held the door as Dar pushed me in. I wobbled in my heels and fell in a heap to their great mirth. They made debasing comments about my reddened backside and my pretty white panties as we travelled under privacy seals into the bowels of the station, John McDonald having stayed behind.

I was beginning to get it. I was supposed to be John McDonald. I was supposed to leave that room. He would. He would be me, taking on passage to Carmichael and the Giant's Rim worlds. When Colach's agents contacted me for reports, it wouldn't be me they would be contacting. It would be this other John McDonald. I wondered if he was the real one or if he had nanotechnology in him as I did.

Well, it couldn't be the same. We slowed, to pull into a station stop, and Taggart let me up. My captors had changed. Their Nebula naval uniforms were gone. Now, they wore the nondescript greys of the merchant ships.

We got out of the hotel car at a much lower-class establishment than that of the Maidenflower Inn. Dar skipped one hand under my left arm and Taggart took my right. A servicer appeared, the one we had seen earlier. He swept up the uniforms and deposited them on his little carrier. He nodded to Taggart and I felt my blood run cold. Poor Marissa. Her body had obviously been disposed of as if she were some piece of trash. She had tried to be kind to me. I don't know why but I found my eyes filling up with tears as I thought of the way they had killed and disposed of her.

"I keep my cutter beam free," Taggart told me, forcing me to stroll slowly in my high-heeled boots as we passed a liquor-drinking 'open' bar. Heavily madeup women clung to the arms of brightly smiling men and milled about the place. I had seen such dives on every station I had ever visited.

"Hey, Dar!" someone yelled. "Where you going with that delicious little bit of space pussy?" I felt many pairs of eyes on me as heads turned to look at me and study me. I was scarlet with shame as I sashayed. I couldn't help it, Taggart insisted I put one foot in front of the other, past the bar, then past another and finally onto a tram that took us to the docks.

I tried to flex against Dar once and immediately felt the touch of a beam barrel in my ribs from Taggart. Dar I could have gotten away from, even in my weakened state as a woman. Taggart seemed to be security trained. So cutter beams were illegal on station. That didn't matter as I was certain he would have used it on me anyway and I would not have been around to see if he got the justice he deserved after he murdered me.

The station guard only glanced at my ID card. "Two guys for one comfort girl," he sniggered at the two men with me. "I hear it's even worse out there in the Boonies. What is it, seven to one, nine to one, on the downbelows? Don't let 'em sweet-talk you into going off station, girl," he directed this at me. "You marry one Carmichael, you marry all his brothers as well."

He was laughing at his wit as Taggart's hand tightened on my arm and I was hauled onto a moving walkway that delivered us at the ingate to a loading freighter.

A young man, barely eighteen, stared at me open-mouthed as I was deposited with my escorts on the ramp to the ship.

"A new girl?" he asked and I shivered at the delight and expectancy in his voice.

"What does it look like?" snarled the man I knew as Taggart.

I tried to walk up the ramp without the affectations that my escorts had forced on me. It was awful to feel as I did in high heels with skirts lightly bobbing about me and then the jiggle of my breasts and the tightness of my shaped waist.

I was pulled into a lift by Taggart who exposed the cutter beam he had been carrying. I went onto what I recognized as the standard passenger quarters on most freighters. I had never seen passenger doors locked with keys before though. Across an empty common room, Taggart opened one of the locked rooms and thrust me in. The aroma of female per-

fumes made my head reel. There were five women in the room, in various stages of undress. They didn't bother to cover up as Taggart pushed me towards them.

"A new one, Alice," he said to a platinum blonde, who was slowly opening an orange with long, daggerlike red nails. "Her name is Caroline and John bought her off a Hordan captain. Caroline doesn't comfort anyone without John's say-so. Got it?"

The blonde women looked stolidly at Taggart and Dar, who was beginning to drool again. Finally, Taggart took him by the arm and pulled him out of the room. One of the women made an obscene gesture to the door after he withdrew.

I stood there, shivering as the women looked me over. I expected at any moment one would say something like, 'You're no woman,' and I would be mortified again.

"We had your clothes put over there," said Alice, pointing to an alcove, its privacy made greater by the large travel-cases of clothing which formed a wall along one side of a wide bed. "You can share with me."

That was when I noticed that the four beds in the large room were all doubles and had screens near to them that would obviously be drawn around them at night. "If Lord John wants you tonight, he can take you in his room," said Alice gruffly. "You tell him that if he calls. I don't care if he is the biggest landowner north and south of the Shannon and has ten wives or not. I'm not hot-bedding it just so he can prove what a stud he is by taking us all again in one watch. You're his girl for a while. He can do you in the comfort of his own quarters."

"No one's going to do me," I murmured with a shudder which was made ten times worse when the women began to laugh at me and my dress, *my dress*, for goodness' sake, began to shiver with me.

"We got a cherry here," said a dark brunette, lying on a padded armchair so that her skirts had fallen down, revealing she was wearing no panties or stockings.

"Don't mind Wanda," said Alice, standing and escorting me to the alcove. I realized then that this must have been a passenger suite but the inner walls had been removed so that the whole place was now open.

"Yeah," said Alice. "Welcome to Carmichael's idea of a cesspit. Showers and the head there." She pointed at a curtained area off on my left. "We eat on main watch and have to do our exercise then. We sleep on third which is coming up in an hour. We're locked in on station and ..." She stopped as a communicator began to chime at her waist.

She listened for a while and looked up at me, frowning.

"Why can't she do that for herself?" Alice asked. I shivered as she talked about me to someone or as someone gave her orders about me. "Right," she finally said.

"Well, aren't you the lucky one?" she asked. "Captain's wardroom. John said to glamorize you. Carmen, get over here and help me. We have to make her into a princess for Admiral Sutcliffe, John says."

I protested as a woman taller than me advanced on me. They manoeuvred me easily into the wardrobe area. Then began one of the worst experiences of my life as they stripped me, re-clothed me and painted and perfumed me like one of them. They ignored

all my little complaints as they brushed out my hair and then pinned it up into a tight bun, just a few curls straying over my face and a thin ponytail falling tantalizingly onto my neck.

They were amazed that my ears weren't pierced but that didn't stop them. I soon had huge, gold, dangling earrings at my ears, the red jewels complimenting the red lipstick and rouge that had been painted on my face. My eyes were spectacular, too, spectacular if you were a woman, that is. I sat between them and watched as they adorned the woman between them, me, with jewels in my hair, around my throat and at my wrists and ankles. I nearly had a fit when Carmen casually stroked my bare breast and suggested that I should get a nipple piercing as well as my ears when I came back. They put me in black underwear, the kind worn by harlots, including a tight bodice again with dangly garters that made me feel *so* weird.

I mean, I had undone such things on many a woman in my time. I never thought *I* would be wearing them or the black silk stockings on my legs. I put on my black, frilled, lacy panties last. "Easiest to take off," said Alice, deadpan, and then she laughed at the flush that I couldn't hold back nor the trembling of my hands.

She just didn't know. I sat there naked with nothing between my legs, nothing, wanting to cry at what they had done to me. They had removed my penis. The thought filled me up as I sat there with them and as the women transformed me in other ways. I could never be like them. I wasn't a woman, I protested silently. But the face and figure in the mirror told me otherwise. I didn't have my manhood. I squeezed my legs together and there was nothing there. And I couldn't examine myself, not with these women so casually dressing me and making my face more like a woman's.

They had painted my nails at my fingers and toes, Amber, another of the girls, coming to help. She stayed while they debated which was the nicest of my 'princess' dresses, finally settling on a midnight blue one that plunged in front, showing off my exaggerated cleavage, my feminine curves, surrounded me with rustling, soft, silky skirts that sent



chills through me each time I moved. I had to wear long, white gloves and a tiara in my hair.

One look in the mirror and I could see that they had been inspired by all the fairy tale princesses in stories that they must have seen as little girls. They must have had dolls that looked like me. It was a totally impractical dress for a spaceship, particularly the long skirts. My high heels were also total frippery. It was like being balanced on stilts.

“Oh my,” said Wanda, sitting up and putting down her dress. Alice told me to whirl and I did so, feeling my skirts swirl about me. It was awful to be a doll for these women, though they didn’t look spitefully at me.

The entry chimes and the lock at the door being opened sounded together and there was John McDonald, in a military uniform I didn’t recognize, and two other men, each of them armed.

“Ye gods, Alice, what did you do?” John asked, walking into the room, stopping and staring at me.

“You said to treat her like a princess,” said Alice smugly as I teetered forward, my skirts still swirling about me. “She didn’t object. And don’t you beat her again like that, animal. She isn’t your wife yet.”

“Not yet,” murmured John McDonald, smiling as his barb struck home and I blushed. He offered me his arm gallantly and I had to take it, feeling all the men and women watching me to see if I made an unfeminine gesture to give myself away.

The marines with us, what else could they be, escorted us through the ship. It was an awful passage. Men came out of corridors and hallways to goggle at me; some made rude comments about bedding me right away before McDonald ordered the marines to arrest the next man to insult his woman.

“She’s not a comfort woman then,” yelled a voice from behind me. I had to take my skirts and lift them femininely or I would have tripped going up the steps to Main Deck and the Captain’s Wardroom.

“Definitely not,” said a smiling John McDonald.

I had had to curtsy to John when he entered the women’s room below decks. I had to do it again on meeting the officers of the ship I was on. The sight of the uniforms, like John’s, convinced me I was not aboard a freighter, whatever it might look like on the outside.

It was galling, to say the least, to have to curtsy like a woman to my captors, to rise up to find them grinning at me, to be complimented by each on some aspect of my feminine condition. I tried to smile as my dress rustled about me. Strange sensations swept through me as I moved but on the inside I was thinking that I would get even for all of this. These grinning, foolish, young men were all dead men.

Then an older man came in and I was brought forward by John McDonald. “Caroline,” John said. “May I present Admiral Rohan Sutcliffe, commander of our small but active navy? Isn’t she everything that Vanyon predicted she would be, Admiral?”

Grey eyes in a lined, lived-in face studied me. I wasn't shocked to see a natural. He looked fortyish and was probably that old. He was younger than me for all that I looked like a teenaged girl.

I went into my curtsy again, this the most graceful of any I had done and the Admiral reached out a hand to lift me up before McDonald could help me. "You were right, John," the Admiral said. "She is lovely indeed and should be in the marriage auction as soon as we arrive on Carmichael." He turned to another officer, bearded like McDonald. "Very well, Captain. You may order the prisoners to the lower hospital while we set out. Make our heading Hordan."

"Very well, sir," agreed the Captain and two-thirds of the men in the cabin left with him. No women, I noted, trembling at the thought, not even me. No, this was a Rim World ship. Women were supposed to be rare and precious, even on the habitable planets like Carmichael. Every officer would be a man, I thought with a sinking feeling. And every woman, even one like me, would be lusted after. I had travelled. I had seen it before.

The Nebula Kingdom treated the whole area as a frontier, to be exploited for raw materials and foodstuffs. The few women were protected and never allowed to be in any dangerous occupation. A man could have as many women as he could keep and it was the hoarding of such and the bestowing of consorts that were often the true measure of loyalties between men on the frontier.

"The idiots have left," said the Admiral to me, still holding my soft hand in his and staring at me as if he had never seen a woman before. He had directed more of his officers off on tasks until only McDonald and two others were left. "All my officers think you are a real woman. Even if they knew that you weren't, as I do, it would make no difference if they saw you dressed like this. Tell me. Have you given any thought about how you are to survive as a woman in a society like ours?"

I flushed. Shudders went through me as I realized what he had said. I wasn't going to get out of this soon. There was no way. I recalled Taggart's words, "Why don't we just rape her?" and knew that that was what the Admiral was referring to. Women, in the Giant's Rim Worlds, usually had only one value as wife or comfort woman, and that was in bed, with a man.

"They didn't prepare her for that," said one of the officers behind me. "She expected to come out of the transformation as John. The Rainclouds think she has."

Oh, keep talking, I thought in my great agitation. There was only one planet where citizens of the Nebula Kingdom were referred to as 'Rainclouds', it was a dark nebula after all that gave the kingdom its name, and that was Congreve, where our bitterest enemies had congregated.

"Ah," said the Admiral, looking me up and down. "Then you are doing remarkably well," he said. "You must dine with me, Caroline, and we will assist you on your transformation into womanhood, won't we, Lord McDonald?"

McDonald looked at the Admiral a little angrily, I thought. Oh wonderful, I thought bitterly. Two men were going to fight over me. Whatever was I getting myself into?

What I was into was an excruciating experience. The other 'officers' were science officers, I gathered, who were interested in my nannies. I had been fed, just a fragment of the huge meals the men downed. I was cosseted throughout and taught what a Carmichael woman was supposed to do at the dining table, from sitting, to taking off my gloves, to placing my hands in my lap. I couldn't help but get used to my high heels, the pull of my underclothes and the swirl of my skirts.

"We should have brought a maid for you," said Robson, the smiling 'vampire' definitely from Congreve. He said that, once I had built up my strength by eating some solid food, he would be acquiring my blood and my transforming and stabilizing nannies.

"A lady always travels with a maid," said McDonald, changing the subject as he had any time I might have learned why this had been done to me. "Perhaps we can promote Amber."

The Admiral shook his head. "And be one woman short for the rest of the crew? Their access is cut back as it is, now that we've sent Nonie off to the Nebula. And when, if you pardon the crudity, Caroline, they find out that you aren't on the list, they are going to be mad as hell at us for holding out the possibility that they were going to screw you. I should have given Caroline her own quarters, and a maid, right away, if I had believed you, John."

They talked freely in front of me, despite McDonald's cautions. They were going to take the special nannies I had been given and replicate them and unless I could find a way of immolating myself in a furnace or on the surface of a star, there was no way I could stop them. But what were they going to do with the nannies? It had taken the scientists at the Royal Hospital a king's ransom to produce nanotechs capable of such a transformation. Of course, they were getting a scientific advance for free.

But what good would it do them? Why would anyone be so avidly interested in transforming men into women? Then I thought about the nine to one ratio I had heard mentioned by the gate guard. And Alice had said something about McDonald having ten wives and I chilled right away as the men discussed holdings on the planet of Carmichael and the current state of the failed rebellion that had occurred there.

IV. WOMANIZED

I couldn't help it. I tried to resist but I couldn't. Amber did become my maid and she taught me how to be a woman. She taught me how to do my makeup, how to do my hair and how to dress.

I slept in a frilly, satiny bed in a woman's nightdress. I examined myself in the bathroom and I couldn't tell how I was different from any woman I had touched in her private parts. I couldn't believe all the changes in me. I had never had glowing, soft skin. I had never had smooth, shapely legs and a firm, cushiony rear like a girl. I remembered being scrawny and nondescript. Now I had a narrow waist, well-formed breasts and my face itself was altered.

My nose was bobbed and my forehead was flat. My eyes had never been blue as were those that looked at me. My lips were full and even without lipstick, they seemed to be

rosy red. My eyelashes were dark and thick and my eyebrows were almost non-existent. Amber insisted that I pierce my ears and so I had permanent rings in my ears.

I was attended at every moment by one of the officers when I wasn't sleeping; the science officers took great delight in having me do feminine tasks for them such as serving them tea. Then they taught me how to dance as a woman which let them put their arms about me. They complimented me on my girlish looks and mannerisms. They hugged me as if I was a girl and kissed my hand when I curtsied to them as I had to do all the time.

I exercised with the comfort women. Alice made me do everything the women did which was basically to dance and do stretches. I didn't know that I could move my hips in such a way until she showed me how to do a 'native' dance. I learned how to shake my breasts and my fanny and she remarked lewdly how good I must be getting in bed. I practised graceful dances with them in very short skirts and when we danced to the mirrored walls, I looked like I was one of them. After a while that is. We had plenty of time.

I was locked in my cabin all alone for several short times before the ship I was on moved back into travelling between the stars. I had forgotten how vast the Rim Worlds were, how far it was between outposts. It was no wonder women would not want to live out here, months of travel from even the closest, civilized worlds.

I got used to being dressed in long skirts and stockings. I got used to the flowery scent Amber said suited me. I got used to having my hair styled differently every day by my bored maid. I got used to her accounts of her trysts with the bridge officers, who were all curious about me.

They said I was a daughter of some impoverished lordling of the Nebula Kingdom and that Lord John McDonald had purchased me from there. It told me a lot about the society I was going into, making me fear it, as I realized what my role would be.

I was a woman. I had to face that. I could be bought and sold. Amber and the comfort women had contracts with Carmichael to serve on their ships. There were more restrictions than on other Republican ships Amber had been on but the money was very good. She had a real nest egg building and one day she was going to go back to Hordan a very rich woman with a dowry that would bring her a biosculpt and a choice of husbands.

My fate was different. She told me about the marriage auction on Carmichael. So few women would go downbelow from the orbiting station that women on the planet were tightly controlled. Once I was downbelow, I would never get out again. I would be the wife of some powerful man, at best. I would have to be his lover.

At that point, I would wake up from my bedtime reverie and find myself shaking in a cold sweat. A warm scented shower and stroking down my feminized body rarely helped. I was a woman and I was being forced into womanly ways. I was being prepared for life as a woman. I should have made Taggart shoot me when he wanted to, when I had seen it in his eyes.

But I had been a coward. I had drawn back. I had cooperated with my captors as I had done twice before in my career as an investigator. I had survived those imprisonments but I had been me then. I had had the power of my position as an investigator going for me. I had been able to talk my way out. How would a woman talk her way out of the predicament she was in if she was in one like mine?

She would use her feminine wiles. That is what she would do. I knew it. I would have to do it to save myself but I balked at the idea. Besides, the Congreve science officers knew who I was. Fascinated as they were at my development physically, I wondered what they would be like if I started to come on to them. I shuddered and got chills again at such a thought. No, if I was going to get out of this mess at all, it was going to be by influencing those men who didn't know who I really was. But I didn't know how they could help me anyway.

I ended up in a fever of anguished thoughts for several sleep watches. Then, when I ran my hands over my panties, I aroused myself. That is, I suddenly felt my breasts beginning to swell and become itchy as I was squeezing my missing parts in frustration. I felt the softness of my thighs and began to toss and turn in my bed, feeling incredibly aroused as I was tangled up in my nightdress.

I must have been monitored. I suspected it was so and the proof came right away as my door opened and the Admiral himself came in. All feeling left me as he approached me, a strange smile on his face. He came right up to the bed and I tried to cower back in fear. He smoothed the sheets and released me from the tangles, getting an eyeful of my bare thighs and panties as I fought to pull down my nightdress.

My fear grew in leaps and bounds as he lowered the lights.

"Rank has its privileges," he said and I heard him moving about before he got into bed with me. He was naked after he removed his night robe.

"Let us continue with what you were doing," he whispered and his hand touched my silk-covered breast. It was like being electrocuted. I jerked and grasped his hand.

"Don't!" I gasped, trying to move away across the bed. He moved closer.

"Are they watching you rape me?" I asked as his hand stretched out across my waist.

"No one has watched you but me, sweet Caroline," Admiral Rohan Sutcliffe breathed in my ear. "Not even our weasel friend, Lord John."

"I'm supposed to believe that?" I jabbered as he pulled me easily to him. I felt his bare leg, so hairy, against mine. "Or do you order them to turn off the monitors when you rape a woman?"

He laughed. The bastard laughed! Then he pulled at my hands which I had up in front of me to protect myself.

"This isn't the rape of a woman," the Admiral said quietly. "Or are you finally going to admit to yourself that you are a woman. Dickens," he was the quiet Congreve officer, "says the transformation will only be complete when you admit that. If you admit you are a woman, I cannot rape you. Every law and moral injunction on my planet would condemn me for it."

"So what is this?" I gasped, pushing against him as his hand stroked my waist and then my hip, lifting my nightie slightly. I reached down and took his hand, fighting him.

"This is a seduction," he said lightly. "I saw that you were going to pleasure yourself and I decided that I should join you. It has probably been longer for me than for you, despite your long trip out from Nebula Prime."

"The comfort women," I gasped as he continued to stroke me, my hand not deterring him in the least.

"I don't share my women," he said bluntly and I heard a touch of anger in his voice. "And I do not rape women either. Mr. Taggart has been demoted one grade for making that threat to you on Frank Station. On my ship, you should have no fear of that."

"Then take your hands off me," I gasped and he laughed again.

"Darling Caroline," he murmured. "What a lovely name McDonald chose for you. It suits you. You should be a princess, you know. You are very beautiful. And you should use your beauty. You should promise me your cooperation for answers to the questions that you must have."

"Such as who betrayed me," I said bitterly.

He laughed and then moved against me strongly, his hand going about me. I felt his hard, engorged manhood against my legs. I convulsed naturally as his face came against mine and he kissed me. I rolled and struggled to get free as he tasted my lips forcefully.

He finally withdrew while I lay there almost sobbing with the tangle of emotions I felt, mostly fear and loathing at myself for letting a man touch me so.

"You smell so sweet, darling Caroline," he murmured, his inner arm still about my waist, pulling me back as I tried to slide out of the bed. "I can sense, though, that this is going to take much longer than I thought. How about a gentle, proper kiss, without any struggling on your part, with some active participation, of course, and I'll answer your question."

I went stiff with shock. I could still feel his lips on mine and weird, nauseated feelings were coursing through me. Two men had kissed me now and both had known I wasn't a woman.

"How can you want to kiss me?" I whispered. "You know that I'm not really a woman."

He turned the illumination to its dimmest but I could still see that he was smiling at me. "But you are," he said lightly. "You have no way back, do you? And no one on Carmichael, believe me, is ever going to help a woman to become a man. It's the shortage of women that is the root cause of all our rebellions.

"Having so few women means that we've all had our adolescent male crushes to get over which often lead to more than mutual fondling. It's our secret sin that we don't talk about. But sex with a pretty youth is not out of the question on Carmichael. Even if it was known that I had slept with a man like you, I would only be tut-tutted at on Carmichael.

"Now I answered your first question and so it is time to pay the forfeit."

The Admiral put his outer arm about me and drew me to him and I began to struggle. "Ah ah," he said. "No struggling now and a pretty kiss, if you please, and you may then ask me another question."

I struggled more as he reached up and took one of my hands and put it about his waist. My breast pushed into his chest and I reacted again, quivering at the electric shock I re-

ceived when my nipple touched his, mine so much larger and, I was shocked to feel, getting harder by the second.

He held me and let me compose myself. "Ready?" he asked at last. He leaned forward and put his lips on mine. This time, he didn't try to overpower me. He just kissed me gently and kept his lips on mine as I let him and didn't pull away. His hands flexed on my hips and I almost pulled away but he didn't stop kissing me.

"There," he said after he had kissed me for what seemed a very long time. "Now that wasn't bad, was it? You kiss very well for a virgin girl, you know." That made me shudder and he laughed again. "I do know how to arouse you, don't I? But I have been watching you on tape every day. I loved it when you tried to do that ballet spin in your dance skirt. The look on your face when Wanda told you that you danced like a man? That was priceless."

I was flushed. I could feel my temperature rising. I knew my body was reacting to the tension I felt as well. That was all. Let him interpret what I had to do any way he wanted. I was just worried and upset over my terrible predicament. And I had a job to do. I had questions I wanted answered.

"Who betrayed me?" I croaked at him.

"Ah," he asked, sitting up a little. He ordered wine suddenly from the room console and I was relieved when he hopped out of the covers and got the glasses from the tray that emerged on the alimentary console. It was strange to look at him, particularly with such an evident hard-on.

He glanced down mockingly as he slipped into bed again, insisting I sit up, fluffing my pillows and then stroking my hair. "Gorgeous," he whispered as he handed me a glass of wine and then civilly cuddled up to me and sipped on his as well.

"I will have to attend to this if you won't," he murmured, his eyes giving a little glance to the bedcovering and I flushed as I knew what he meant. "But who betrayed you isn't worth that," he added to my great relief and his great amusement.

"Who betrayed you?" Admiral Sutcliffe asked rhetorically, his grey hair now ruffled about his head making him appear much younger. "The obvious answer is Emmus Vanyon, which is true. He injected the nannies into you, after all, but he was directed to by our agent in the Royal Hospital, one of the few who knew that these nannies had been developed there. Our agent thinks this is just about industrial espionage. But Vanyon knew that he wasn't turning you into John McDonald. We'd had that identity ready for Colach's counter if Kairan Mullaney, a cousin of mine, who was to be the future Lord Shipley, didn't succeed.

"Our new response kills two birds with one stone. We get the nannies we want from you and we get to see what kind of operation Colach runs when she tries to contact you. It will be four or five Terran years before she realizes anything went wrong, we figure. By then, Congreve should be in a shooting war with the Nebula Kingdom and we'll be on the side, neutral, but protecting most of the Giant's Rim, just as the Nebula protects Metaxa."

Sutcliffe took the wine from my hands and snuggled up to me. He looked surprised when I pushed him away. "Not very interesting," I stammered as his hand stroked my breast. "I already guessed all that. Who is your agent at Royal?"

"Ah," he said, leaning over and kissing me on my unwilling lips. "This is worth some cooperative cuddling."

He lowered the lights even more as I quivered. I felt his arms about me. I yelped, there was no other word to describe it, as he lifted me on top of him. He just held me as I struggled, struggled with the new feelings coursing through me as my breasts pushed into his chest, my hair falling over my shoulders and onto his face. I felt his strong legs grip mine and I felt his bone-like extension on my thighs, just my thin nightie between us.

"Cooperation," he murmured, pulling me to him, his hands taking mine and putting them about his neck as I pressed even more softly into him. He raised his head, kissed me and repeated the word.

I let my head fall a little and I kissed him. It was more of a peck really but he just laughed at me. "That won't do at all," he said, and he put both his hands on my breasts. Oh, it was torture as he caressed me. He touched my arms with his elbows and I sort of fell into his face and he kissed me, my curly hair touching his face as he moved his mouth. Suddenly I felt his tongue inside my mouth and all sorts of strange, weird feelings were going off in me. I felt his manhood jerking and pressing into my thighs as I pressed them together, but then he began to stroke my back and my hips as he moved me and my aching breasts found pleasure in sliding over him.

"You know the head of nanotech research at Royal," he said. I nodded as he kissed my face and my ear which was surprisingly pleasurable, then his mouth found mine again. We couldn't speak for several minutes as pleasure and shame rippled through me, the same sensations I had felt earlier, the sensations I had felt when I had touched myself before, when I had stroked myself.

"His wife," the Admiral murmured as his caressing hands made pleasure course through me. "She has very expensive tastes."

"Why do you need nannies from me?" I asked, my nerves all jangling and crisscrossed by the weirdest emotions. He grunted. He rolled me over then and suddenly my legs were outside his. He pushed up my nightie while fright took over and I tried to push him away off me.

"This is for the answers to all your questions," he said and he put his hand on my panties and began to caress me as I had been doing to myself when he stopped me. He deliberately pulled down my panties and lifted my nightie off me, while I lay there, pinned by him.

"Just say no," he said, stroking my legs and I convulsed. "Just say no and I won't tell you any more. Or are you going to be a good girl and pay the price for what I tell you? It hasn't been as bad as you thought, has it? Don't tell me you aren't getting as much pleasure from loving me as I am from loving you. Your body says otherwise."

I was betrayed by the body they had made for me. When he touched the vagina they had given me, I wasn't convulsing to keep him off me. I *wanted* him to do that. It was like

scratching a familiar, nagging itch and making it right. I wanted to squeeze on his hand as he felt me and the ravages they had made of my genitals. I don't know why but I seemed to be engorging there and getting very wet.

"Oh oh," he murmured and he was laughing. "I had better hurry."

And then he pushed his manhood into me and lowered his body onto me and began to kiss me ardently as he hadn't done before. I spasmed, arching my back which only seemed to allow him to penetrate me more fully. Then he began to ride me and the sensations were incredible. A man was riding me and I clung to him. I urged him on as I climaxed, feeling something weird and wonderful inside me as I released whatever it was that had been dammed up inside me.

I wriggled and jiggled as he began to come. His kisses and caresses intensified and I forgot who I was and the game we were playing. I only wanted more and more of him. My legs wrapped about him as he rode and rode me. He called me 'sweetheart' and 'darling' and I didn't care as a surge of indescribable electricity surged over me and I felt a volcanic release from him and I knew what I had done.

I had made love to a man. I had let a man do me, as the comfort women would have said. And he had seemed to love it. He was kissing my face and hair and stroking my breasts and my hips and my legs. And I was letting him, answering his kisses with my own, wondering why I had never had such a cathartic release when I was a man.

V. WELCOMED

Rohan made love to me several times on that watch; he came to me thereafter on each third watch of my stay aboard the disguised freighter as it plunged into the star-deserted area of space called the Giant's Rim. I learned so much from Rohan. I learned the politics and customs of the Rim Worlds. I was terrified as I learned of the plans they had for me and my nannies. The poor prisoners.

But then I learned so much more that Rohan didn't know he was teaching me. I learned to be a woman. I learned to love being a woman. I learned to love being kissed, cuddled and made love to by a man. I recalled some of the tricks of the women I had known, things that they had done to me and they worked beautifully on Rohan. Before I left the *Outland Dagger*, he told me he loved me and I told him the same.

He regretted that I had to follow the convention of being put up for auction but all women entering the Carmichael patrimony met the same fate. There were too many wealthy holders on the planet and too few women. I would be on the auction block within ten days of landing and I was certain to find a high price. Within the hour of being sold, I would be a bride and the wife of some wealthy man. If I ever saw Rohan again, it would only be if my husband permitted it. I might see him at a Grand Ball but that was unlikely. Only married men and their families, and the most privileged and trusted of their aides, were allowed at such affairs.

"You will be the belle of the Midwinter Ball," said Rohan wistfully as we made love for the last time as the ship prepared to dock on station.

"Hide me out here," I whispered. "I'll go with you anywhere in the galaxy."

“Oh that I could,” Rohan whispered as he smiled and kissed me gently. I desperately snuggled up to him, demanding his attentions, his little kisses, his praises of my femininity. I guided his hands to my breasts and he loved me but I had overspent him.

“I can’t do anything more for you, darling Caroline,” he said as I wrapped my legs tighter about him. “I’ve given you every bit of information that I can think of to help you, but I’m afraid it will all be of no use to you in the end. A man like Greening, Wharton or McDonald is going to buy you. They’ll find out that you have been prolonged when you don’t age and I wouldn’t be surprised if you were sold and sold again as your husbands die off. Only when I’m too old and infirm will I have the money to have a chance at you.”

“There are prolongation drugs for people of age,” I murmured, kissing and caressing my lover with my body.

“That cost a planetary fortune,” agreed Rohan. “With what, a ten to twenty per cent failure rate for those past the age of forty Terran years? And I’d be sixty before I’m next on schedule for an Inner Worlds tour, which might be cancelled anyway if I show deterioration because of age. How would you like to be tied to an old codger like me, a young and needy woman like you? I’ll never forget you, Caroline. You are, and always will be, the love of my life.”

Which, naturally, made me cry. The love of his life. Poor Rohan Sutcliffe. And he was poor by the standards of his planet, he told me. And poor, in Carmichael terms, meant to not have the ability to purchase a wife. I was still crying when Amber helped me dress in my princess clothes and I made a secure and private descent to the surface of Carmichael, in the custody of Lord John McDonald, the head of the planet’s intelligence services. Its head spy, in fact.

I made a sensational entrance into St. Duncan’s Castle, the seat of the Lord Protector of Carmichael, as the ruler of the planet styled himself. He was the oldest man I had seen in a generation. I had seen men like him once before on the planet, Outer Stanway, much further out along the rim, a backward planet where the importation of fertilizer had been of major importance.

Carmichael may be classified as a rural planet but it was far from that. The ‘Castle,’ styled on something from Old Terra’s history, might look aged by its cut, stone blocks and wide, stepped hallways that I had to climb to the throne room, but the security systems were new. The blasters and cutter beams that the guards carried looked very modern and new. Overall, the place reeked of wealth and conspicuous spending, from the very modern vid recording that announced my presence to a watching planet to the gorgeous dresses of the ladies who applauded my entry into the throne room.

I was glad that I was so beautifully turned out and only the slightest bobble of self-disdain crept through me as I swished my way with mincing steps across the carpeted floor to the throne where I curtsied again, holding my skirts and petticoats just so. The king, no, the Lord Protector here, came down to take my hand, kiss it, fondle it, and help

me to stand. He introduced me to his wives; both were as old as he was, but their hair was rich in color, one auburn and the other brunette.

Lord Sennett Graham, Baron of Duncansford, was Lord Protector of Carmichael. He called me 'milady' as if it was already my title though I was 'Caroline of Hordan' according to the ID card I had been given by Rohan before I left his ship. I missed him already, I thought, with a catch in my throat, as I looked down demurely. The forest of eyes upon me was something I had thought I could steel myself to bear. I couldn't. It was far too much to be the centre of such intense scrutiny. I shivered nervously and the Lord Protector smiled at me.

"It is far too much, isn't it, milady?" he said in a very pleasant voice. "But we are all agog. To have such an exotic and beautiful young woman choose our planet as her place of residence thrills us all. We hope you are a harbinger of the future, my dear."

I glanced over at Lord John McDonald, who frowned at me.

I didn't dare to say what I should have. A harbinger of the future. Oh yes, I was that. Somewhere else on the planet were a number of medshells and in them were the 'prisoners' I had seen on a vid in the captain's wardroom on the *Outland Dagger*. The nannies I had brought with me to Carmichael were at work on them. Soon, Lord John McDonald would have more women with which to reward his loyal followers.

Somewhere on this planet, there was a nanotech production installation which even now was turning over its production to replicate those injected into me. The Congreve officers were objecting, Rohan told me. But Congreve didn't have Carmichael and the other Rim World's problems, my lover had whispered to me as I increased his passion by kissing every inch of his body. Each year, the Shelter Republics conducted pogroms against their dissidents. They rounded up all the men and shipped them off, along with the beggars off their streets, the dregs of their societies. Where did I think they all ended up, Rohan asked, as I worked my way down his belly and he began to pant hard in anticipation of the pleasure I was going to bring to him.

Oh, I was a terrible minx to the first male lover I had ever known. I did love him, sort of. Well, I had nothing to compare him to and he was teaching me so much. The base population of a hundred thousand, four hundred years before on Carmichael, had grown slowly; the women, like women elsewhere, did not want to be burdened by childbirth, but the male population grew every year as more and more 'prisoners' were dumped on the planet. It had staggered over the million mark just a hundred years before but then had quadrupled since after so much dumping by the Shelter Republics.

Carmichael wasn't regressive in the sense of treating women like slaves, forcing them to have children. They had tried it on Hordan once, Rohan told me, and the male infanticide rate had risen tenfold. Good news for the exceptional 'prisoner' seeking to rise to the status of citizen. Disastrous news for those men who only thought in terms of their progeny and their dynastic ambitions.

Since rich men like the Lord Protector had multiple wives, three had become the maximum allowed, but few women were available to the poor classes. The great lords on their estates all kept 'comfort houses' for their servants and workers and there was a regular trade in such women, most from off planet, and many again, the dregs of the Edge, the

name given to places like Frank, on the edge of the technologically rich powers of the crowded space close to the Foxbrush Nebula.

I wondered, as the Lord Protector bestowed his favor on me by chatting to me for over a quarter of an hour, about how his world was growing and improving. More young women should be attracted to Carmichael and he and his government would love to hear from me on what they could do to improve the situation.

I knew that Congreve was about to make another massive dump on Carmichael, another half-million men onto a planet that had just fought off a rebellion of husbandless men in which close to that number had been slaughtered. But the Lord Protector said nothing of that to me, nor of the hundreds of thousands of prisoners at work on the cold, northern continent, harvesting its myriad of wild, ferocious, furry animals, and its endless forests, with no weapon greater than an old-fashioned fireax. And not a woman on the whole continent.

"I should bid on you myself," said the Lord Protector, stroking his ample moustaches. That only produced mock chiding from his wives.

"You complain about our nagging now, milord," said the auburn-haired, well-preserved old woman who had descended from the throne with her husband. "Take on this beauty and Ursula and I will make your life a living hell, Sennett beloved." Then she smiled very sweetly at me. "Don't worry, dear. We won't let the old goats on this planet get you. You must come to visit us tomorrow at our matinee, too. I am going to have the Royal seamstresses present with some designs for your bridal dress."

"Yes, milady," said the brunette, taking my other hand, and admiring my nails. "There are the Alster girls to be betrothed, and several minor notables, but you will be the prize of the cotillion." She said as if it was something I should be proud of and enjoy.

I was going to be a prize cow, I thought bitterly, trying to smile as the Lord Protector led me forward and introduced me to the greater lords, the major notables, of the Protectorate of Carmichael. I curtsayed and curtsayed and smiled and smiled. My earrings bobbed as I bowed and my pony tail caressed my neck. I flushed as so many men stared at my bodice, so tight, and so revealing of two of my most distinct charms.

I hated Lord Wharton, who almost drooled over my hand.

An older man, a contemporary of the Lord Protector, it seemed, because he was the only one to call him 'Sennett,' promised to bid for me which made me shake in my petticoats.

'Sennett' protested laughingly. "You old fool," he said heartily. "A girl as ripe as this one," he put his arm familiarly on my arm as I shook inside, "would be the death of you in a week, in a day, no, in a night, I'll wager."

Around him, everyone tittered and I saw women lift fans to their mouths to hide their smiles. I had a fan tied to my wrist by Amber, my maid, but I had no idea how to use it.

"Not for me, old man," said the greybeard, going a beautiful shade of pink. "I think she would make a wonderful wife for my second son, Gavan. You might have seen him, my lady, on the *Dagger*. Not one of the Navy boys, no. He shipped as Cargo on the last trip." On a freighter, people were known by the jobs they held.

"Brown, chestnut hair?" I asked.

"That's just half the planet," muttered the Lord Protector jovially as the greybeard nodded his head in agreement.

"Green eyes, straight teeth and nose, a cleft chin, about six feet tall," I said, recalling the young boy who had been in the cargo hatch as I had entered the *Outland Dagger*.

"That's Gavan to a tee," said the old man, nodding at the amused Lord Protector. "You did notice him then."

"Oh yes," I agreed. It was perhaps a little too much because the old men began to smile with far too much amusement on their faces. Oh, I wished I had been instructed on how to use my fan as a woman. I would have liked it just then to have it to hide behind.

"That was Lord Stanwich," said a voice in my ear and as I turned, my skirts swirling as I directed them, I nearly bumped into Lord John McDonald. I had to curtsy again to him and he took his time about taking my hand and kissing it as all the other men had done.

"Don't think for one minute that I am going to let a wolf like you loose in this society of lambs," he murmured, smiling broadly, knowing that his words would not carry. "No matter the price, I shall top everyone even if I have to sell some of my ten wives to do it."

"You-you have ten wives?" I stammered. "I thought three was the law."

Lord John McDonald smiled. "It is," he said. "I own the Shannon River valley. It has ten beautiful lakes, the pastureland being the finest on the planet. The lakes are called the Ten Wives of the Shannon. I tell the comfort women I have ten wives. It amuses them. In reality, I have never yet been married. I am looking forward to it. I expect you to be a dutiful a wife and woman to me as you were to the Admiral of our little navy."

I was chilled. I tried to smile my way through the rest of the conversations with the notables of Carmichael. I tried to behave a little like the coquette as Amber told me girls about to be auctioned or betrothed, it was all the same on Carmichael, were expected to behave. But the swish of my dress and petticoats and my perfume, even the caress of my hair and earrings failed to thrill me. I had only to look at the man I was supposed to be to feel like I had one foot in my grave.

VI. FEMINIZED

The nights and days that followed before the bridal auction were a swirl of female-centered activities. If Carmichael women were restricted in some ways, the bonds were silken. I wore ballgown after ballgown as I was feted at one reception after another. Amber was in a constant tizzy getting my hair done in one fantastic style after another. I danced with every eligible man on the planet, I think, and my makeup was flawless throughout. I was expected to be a simpering female and in my gorgeous dresses, my breasts so exposed almost all of the time, it was frightening and frighteningly easy.

I got used to curtsying to men, to having them compliment me, and thanking them prettily. I got used to having my chest and shoulders exposed and wearing heavy necklaces and long, dangling earrings. I got used to the aroma of feminine perfume, 'Upland Flowers,' outrageously expensive according to Amber, in which I floated in my stockinged

legs and soft, long, full gowns. I was photographed all the time and so I had to keep a smile on my face. I saw myself on the vids and couldn't believe that the lovely, dewy girl was me.

I could feel my curly hair caressing my soft shoulders but when I saw myself on the vids, I saw how long and shiny and curly it was and I longed to run my hands through it as any man would if he had looked at me. My underwear was a scandal by Nebula Kingdom standards, so brief and silky and alluring. I was hot and fevered just putting it on. It was the fashion to be tightly laced into our bodices, to show off our small waists, girlish figures and soft-skinned, full breasts. And that was how I appeared, even at the female-only receptions I had to attend during the days.

I was surprised how welcoming the women were. They kissed and hugged me and called me 'sister' and several said that they hoped that I would be their sister wife and told me in great detail, very earnestly, how skilled as lovers their husbands were and how fortunate I would be to marry into their families. I got so hot talking to Lady Rhonda Paraway, so young, petite, and blonde that I wanted to tell her that it wasn't her husband I was interested in, nor the impressive length of his you-know-what.

"Such a young girl still," said Lady Judith Raines, putting her arm through mine and claiming my company for a walk through her scented rose garden at the reception I had been brought to at Castle Raines.

Judith, I should call her that, 'milady' had said, since we were soon to be of the same rank, was a thirtyish woman and lightly dismissed what her husband did with a vague, "Oh, he's involved with all those new factories they keep adding to in Lannan."

My dress and petticoats rustled as our dresses met and she made a gesture with her fan at the very young Lady Rhonda, now giggling with a number of brightly dressed girls like herself. "I love that dark shade of pink," Judith said, touching my dress, as we both had to lift our skirts to go up two stone steps on the walkway. Our high heels clicked in unison. Carmichael women never wore anything but high heels to accentuate the sweep of the long gowns we wore.

"Connor would love to take that dress off you," Judith went on as I flushed at the salacious grin on her face. "Young men like Paraway would tear it off you but Connor, well, Margot and I have trained him well." Lady Margot Raines was their co-wife, I understood, and they were in the market for their third. But Judith wanted to make something very clear to me.

"We have a very broad-minded marriage, you know," she said and I noted a hint of nervousness about her. "Margot and I, well, we share the bed with Connor, you know. He likes that," she added meaningfully. "That we share everything."

"Everything?" I asked as she squeezed my arm.

"Oh yes," she smiled, leaning towards me. "We couldn't accept a third unless she understood that. Connor asked me to sound you out." She put her arm about my waist and reached up to a point out a large, golden variety of rose. "He is very sophisticated unlike others I've heard of. He encourages Margot and me, and he would you, to pleasure each other when he has spent himself. It arouses him to new heights, don't you see?"

I did but I could scarcely believe it. It seemed to me that this society was far too strongly obsessed with sex.

"Will your husband be at the Liston soiree tonight?" I asked, heat rising in me as I felt her hand casually caress me as we turned back to the other ladies.

Judith pulled a face. "Problems in Lannan," she said. "If you ask me, trying to build a nanotech industry on the kind of struggling economy we have is far too ambitious. But Connor is one of McDonald's supporters and that means we are hell bent on the future, I suppose. Can you imagine a world where we aren't the object of all men's desire night and day, where women are so commonplace, even your bodyguards could have women of their own at home?" She laughed. "Then who would they be guarding us against?"



Lady Margot then appeared with three handsome children, two very pretty girls and a boy. "The fair boy is mine," said Lady Judith, guiding me over to meet a red-haired woman who looked at me with distinct interest, her eyes spending a lot of time on my elevated bosom. "Margot doesn't want any more kids and I've taken precautions to make sure I won't get pregnant again. So, in that regard, motherhood will be all up to you. Connor will insist on another three at least, just so you should know."

I fluttered badly inside as I was presented to the children who looked at me intently. Young Connell, Margot's son, asked the inevitable question. "Are you going to be my new mommy?" he asked while all about me women in summery, frilly dresses, like mine, and long beribboned hair, like mine, tittered behind their fans.

"I might be," I said, leaning down to be at his level. It was a mistake, for the little boy put his hand on my breast, scandalizing his mother even as it startled me.

"They're nice," Connell protested as his mother tried to explain to him his faux pas while the ladies giggled again. "She's so pretty, mama. Ask papa to buy her for me."

Learning right from the cradle, I thought, as I smiled with the other ladies.

"Very handsome children," I said to Lady Margot, who had lifted up Connell and was smiling into his face even as she murmured that she would ask her husband to purchase me but because so many men wanted me, it was unlikely I would be his mama, but I might be his aunt.

"One of the advantages of having a husband invested in Lannan," she said, "is that we can buy anything we want and Connell knows that. He thinks he just has to ask and we will get it for him."

"Oh," I said, giving her what I hoped was a pretty smile. "Judith keeps talking about Lannan but I don't understand." I let my voice trail off and she smiled at me, a really nice woman, I could tell.

"Someone has to try out what the rest of the galaxy has had for, what, four generations," said Margot conversationally, taking my hand and walking me, still carrying Connell, to the serving girls, smiling as they handed out punch to all the ladies, including me.

"Our children are nanny-enhanced," went on Margot as a younger girl smiled and took Connell to play in the adventure garden. "In a year or so, we'll be producing prolongation drugs and Georgina will be one of the first to be of the new generation that will make Carmichael the equal of any of the Republics. Let them try prisoner-dumping then."

The last was said with such zeal and fury that I had to raise my eyebrows in surprise. "You haven't seen the poor wretches in Coldhaven, have you?" asked Lady Margot, after telling me how much she loved 'Upland Flowers' and leaning in over my breasts to inhale me, making me stir down in my tiny, lace panties.

"Now they've sent Lord Carty and Fennan Mullaney there with the other rebels," she went on. "Sheila and Patricia will be auctioned off but none of the Lords will bid on them. I hope they're not purchased on an estate we know. I'd hate to be served by Sheila Sutcliffe at a soiree. We were girls together at the Castle School, you know."

"Sutcliffe?" I asked. "I came here on the *Dagger* with an Admiral Sutcliffe."

"Oh, Rohan Sutcliffe," said Lady Margot with a genuine smile. "He's a charming man, isn't he? I wish men could marry into the nobility like his sister did. He should marry, you know. He did bring in a couple of girls but they were bought away from him at the betrothal auctions. If Rohan would only join up with John McDonald's faction, they'd protect him from such stupidities."

I recalled all the 'pillow talk' I had had with Rohan as he tried to prepare me for this life on the planet of Carmichael. Again, I felt quite warm as I recalled how he had kissed me and how I had responded to him. I imagined what it would be like if it was he here with his arm about me and not Lady Margot Raines.

I shivered and Margot called for a serving 'girl,' she must have been fifty, to bring us all warming wraps. "Tell us all about your bridal dress," Margot then said in excited anticipation as many women clustered about me. "Ursula Graham says that it's going to be the most spectacular dress ever seen on this planet."

If I blushed at that, I had to. I couldn't believe what the people of Carmichael allowed in wedding dresses. This one left nothing to the imagination.

"It mustn't," said Judith, joining us. "The betrothed has to see what he is buying. It is a bridal auction, after all."

All the ladies agreed with that. "I still have my dress," said Lady Rhonda. "Don't tell Caddy that I told you but he still loves me to wear it for him on special occasions."

"No wonder," put in an attractive brunette in a yellow gown. "That white silk you used was transparent, you know."

"It wasn't!" gasped Rhonda and then smiled as she realized she was being teased.

Wait till they see my dress, I thought, fear making my skirts tremble against me. Transparent is only a mild way of describing what the 'royal' seamstresses wanted me to wear.

VII. AUCTIONED

I danced all night before my wedding before the Ladies put me to bed. "Here's where we tell you all the horrible things men do to women," said Lady Ursula Graham, the raven-haired wife of the Lord Protector. It was her maids, young, beautiful girls with soft, manicured hands, who took away my jewellery and combed out my hair and creamed and wiped my makeup for me.

I was undressed before all the women. Ursula sighed over my wispy bra to her fellow consort, the auburn Lady Elinor Graham. "Oh, how I wish I could still wear something like this," she said longingly.

I flushed. I didn't know where to look as my breasts were exposed and then my legs, my garter belt unhooked by unfamiliar female hands as goose bumps covered my skin. A circle of ballroom-gowned women watched as my stockings were slid down my legs and then my panties were taken down, exposing my most private, female parts to their watching eyes.

"Men can be such brutes," said Lady Ursula, her eyes sparkling with humor as I stood there, shivering in fright, not knowing where to put my hands. The maids stood on little stools and brushed and brushed my hair, finally tying white ribbons into it to hold the mass of curls back from my face.

"Their lusts can be quite unnatural," said Lady Elinor, almost laughing. I realized that they following some ritual, some script that I did not know.

"Thank goodness," said a quiet voice from among the court ladies and smiles broke out on many faces.

"We tame men with our bodies," said a third woman, whose name I had forgotten.

Then followed a listed recital of the ways a woman could satisfy her man. "Ooo, that's a good one," "Have to try that one again," "They really like that" were comments that followed the descriptions.

I was scarlet in shame and embarrassment as the litany went on, as did the comments from the second row of well-dressed women. Then, a long, white nightdress was passed

over my head with a drawstring under my breasts that was pulled tightly by the girls. I was then escorted by the Lord Protector's consorts to a silk-canopied bed.

Lady Ursula stroked my heated face and then bent and kissed me on the cheek. "Sleep well, little girl," she said. "This is your last sleep as a virgin. From tomorrow on, you may never sleep alone again but you will have a husband to love and comfort you. Be true to him, whoever he is."

Lady Elinor followed, smoothing out my hair behind me so that it fell on my bare shoulders and the tiny straps that held the night gown to me. Her words were much the same.

The other women, smiling broadly at me, kissed me and did the same, several saying they envied me and wished they could be brides again. You can have it, I thought wildly as my breasts tented the front of my nightie and more soft, feminine kisses rained down on me and I was promised that after tomorrow I would be just like them.

I don't *want* to be like them, I wanted to scream, but then Ursula gave me what she called laughingly 'a last virgin drink' and I went out like a light.

I awoke to the cold water run over my breasts and the giggles of the young girls who were serving as my maids. I was naked again in the bath with four young ladies attending me. "Sorry, but we're done," murmured one of the girls, Sara I think. "You have to wake up now, Caroline, and put on your dress."

I struggled to get up and soft hands supported me on all sides. I rose out of the bath and they began to gently towel me off, all of them.

The towel slid easily over my smooth legs, between my legs, and there was no slight tug on my pubic hair. I looked down in panic. Sara grinned up at me. "The men like it clear," she said.

I gulped and was escorted by the giggling girls into the dressing room where I could see myself in the full mirror. They had done my hair. Across my forehead, I had tight curls and strands of wavy hair. Then my honey-colored hair was pulled back in a tight, curled mass behind my ears and down, over my shoulders and partway down my back. Gold-flecked strands ran through it and I sensed that it was pinned and set like that.

There were gold bands at my ears and gold bands on my upper arms. One of the girls put a necklace about my neck that must have been made of glass for such jewellery would have been worth a fortune.

I sat on a backless, padded chair, a very shapely, nude female, as the girls did my makeup, my lids silvery and shimmering with the sparkly paint they used on me. They enhanced my dark eyelids and narrow eyebrows. My cheeks were rouged and my face lightly powdered as well as my neck. They spent a lot of time on my mouth, getting the proportions and the color 'perfect,' as they said when they were finished.

Then they clothed me, if you could call it that. My panties were just a smidgeon of white material on my vagina and thin white cords around my hips. My hips were exposed along with the tops of my legs. My bra was much the same, thin and wispy with the intent of pushing me up and making my breasts rise and jut forward more than they normally would.

I wore glittery white stockings, glittery silvery high heels and glittery garters that the girls giggled over as they attached them to my thighs. My dress was of the same sort of gauzy material but the layers of thin, almost transparent material was slitted. The panels moved in such a way that my legs were always exposed, my garters flashing unexpectedly at times, as my silky underclothing moved with the glittery cloth of my dress. At the back, my dress flared out from my shaped waist in a train of skirts and underskirts that swirled about me, so light were they when I changed direction, sending off waves and waves of sensuous feeling each time I moved.

The bodice clung tightly to me but it had open panels in it where I was exposed, especially about my breasts. So my nipples were covered. Enough was on show that there could be no dispute about my femininity. I couldn't believe it as I stood up and the young girls with me sighed.

"Oh, you are so lovely," said Sara, hugging me impulsively, crushing my breasts with hers and then the other girls had to hug me as well. Oh, I wanted my penis back. I want it, I want it, I chanted to myself as the girls hugged me and then put a veil over me that covered me from head to toe.

A wreath of golden roses was placed in my hands and they led me out of the robing room along a hallway which was lined with the male and female servers of the castle. I heard applause begin and trembled as I heard whispers of how beautiful I was. Each time I moved, my skirts opened, exposing my legs, and even the tiniest, mincing steps didn't help.

I joined other veiled figures at the entrance to a long hall and veiled girls came up to me to give me a hug as best they could. "Oh, I'm so glad to be betrothed on the same day as you, Lady Caroline," said one.

"This will be a day we will always remember," whispered another.

So will I, I thought, as I extended my veil to hug a very excited, young girl. I've done quite a few things I was ashamed of for the Nebula Kingdom that I wanted to forget. No way was I ever going to forget the day I was a bride. This would haunt my nightmares forever.

Then the sponsors came in and it was the Lord Protector himself who came to me and took my hand and placed it on his. "You are the loveliest bride I have ever seen," Lord Sennett Graham said earnestly. "How I wish we had longurum in my day. I'd have given half the protectorate for you."

He led me forward down an aisle through the throng of people and up onto a raised platform. The applause grew and grew as the other six excited girls and I were paraded. We sat nervously in white, high-backed chairs amid the decorations while various regulations were read out between peals of music.

I had to go first and the Lord Protector's old hands were shaking as he took the veil from me and they all got to see me clearly. "A million!" someone called from the back of the hall and there was laughter.

"Now, now," said the amused auctioneer. "Let's have order, gentlemen. Let me acquaint you all with Caroline of Hordan, who will today be bought into citizenship of our

protectorate by some extremely fortunate bidder. Who is there then who will offer the comfort of his home and fortune to this extraordinarily beautiful example of the fairer sex?"

That was me. An example of the fairer sex. I could feel all the eyes on me as I was paraded about the flowered path on the stage, my skirts swirling as the Lord Protector, on a higher walking track, stopped and pirouetted me so all could see my legs, my stockings, my garters. I saw one man actually lean down for a better view of my panties.

Oh goodness, I thought, close to tears, trying desperately not to break down as I tried to keep my hands in front of me; my breasts thrust forward as I tried to brace myself for what was to come. The music died away, and the auctioneer said almost reverently, "What am I bid for Caroline of Hordan?"

The bidding went in waves. At first, it was a lot of men I had never heard of or seen before. At five million, there was a stir as Lord Stanwich, he with the younger son, bid for me. I saw the young man sitting with his father, all scrubbed and clean in a dark suit. Oh, he would do, I thought, thinking of his access to spacecraft. Through him, I could get off this planet. I could be a cutesy, little wife for him. He would soon be willing to do anything for me. Keep bidding, I thought, as Lord Connor Raines joined the bidding. He was a blonde-haired older man, sitting with his two wives. Judith looked absolutely determined, watching me so greedily that it made me shudder.

Lord Stanwich finally passed at twelve million and I saw Judith's face light up as I churned inside at the thought of her getting her hands on me.

"Fifteen," said a cool voice from the side of the podium. There was a buzz in the audience and I didn't have to look over. I knew that it was Lord John McDonald. He moved to the bidding seats in front of the auctioneer and at first I didn't recognize him. He had shaved off his beard. He looked so slim and dark in his dark-blue suit and black bow tie.

"Ah," said the auctioneer, all bluff joviality. "A man who has yet to take a wife under the terms of the protectorate. You would indeed be fortunate, Lady Caroline," he went on, "if this bid succeeds. You would be the sole wife of Lord John McDonald and the bride's share would be entirely yours."

That was about forty percent of the total price, returned to the bride and her husband, in which prior wives had equal shares.

Lady Judith Raines had a spot of colour on her cheek. She was clearly speaking harshly to her husband and he did bid again. But Lord John McDonald clearly outbid him each time. At twenty-two million, Lord Connor Raines had had enough. Each bid now brought gasps from the audience. Judith looked furious as her husband shook his head to the auctioneer.

"Hearing no further bids," the auctioneer said slowly, drawing out his words as my heart beat faster and faster. Oh, Rohan, come and rescue me, I urged silently, but there was no knight on white charger for me. Why should there be, I thought bitterly. What man dreams of a handsome knight to come and rescue him from a fate worse than death? "I give acquiescence and protection to the bid of Lord John McDonald. I proclaim that on this day, Lord John McDonald has taken as wife, Lady Caroline McDonald. The children of this union will be natural citizens of our blessed protectorate."

Children? Well, there wouldn't be that, I thought miserably as the crowd began to applaud wildly. Lord John McDonald came and stood beside me, taking my hand and putting it over his arm.

"We circle," he murmured, smiling broadly, but I could see that it didn't reach his eyes. "We come back here and stop. You give me a kiss of acceptance and we are married."

I minced daintily beside him and even managed a smile or two as we circled. A sea of familiar faces smiled up at us, save for that of Lady Judith Raines. She looked thunderously at Lord John McDonald. She looked like a woman who had been robbed of something precious.

I stopped when he did and the applause died and I could feel the anticipation of the audience as a palpable thing. I could do it. I had heard that it was done. I could deny him a kiss and be sold then to the next high bidder. It was a rare but not unknown happening in this frontier society. What a scandal that would be, I thought, looking at the smiling John McDonald, the man I was supposed to be. He deserved it. He knew who I was and he had put me through all this. He must be getting perverted pleasure from putting me through this. I hated him.

He leaned forward and kissed me. And the crowd went wild. He seemed to stick to my mouth and his arms went from mine to about my waist. I stiffened as he first kissed me but that only made my breasts rise. I wanted to pull away but his mouth followed mine and I had to straighten or I would have fallen. That only made me lean into him and that, as it shows clearly on the vids, looks like I am eagerly kissing him back, his arms about my scandalous dress, stroking my overheated skin.

Dazed, I freed myself at last and he hugged me close to him. I looked up at him, at my lipstick on his mouth. I had to hang on to him for support as we went down the stairs and it seemed like hundreds of people wanted to clap him on the back.

If one more person had told me I was *so* beautiful and my dress was *so* heavenly, I would have punched them. We had to drive in an open car then about Duncansford, my husband discharging money and candies to the children in their best clothes. The boys and girls waved and waved and I had to wave back and smile as would the other brides who followed me with their husbands. We ended at the Legislature, where a fussy clerk went through a formal ceremony at high speed, and I was issued a databox of records proving that I was Lady Caroline McDonald, wife of Lord John, and future mother of his children. I was also a full citizen of the Protectorate of Carmichael and they would protect me 'forever' against all harm.

We finally had breakfast in the huge hall as everyone began to arrive to greet us and wish us well, including a much more controlled Lady Judith Raines.

"I should have known," she said simply. "You only had to see the way John looked at you to know he wanted you." She smiled brightly as I accepted her hug. "As much as I wanted you, too," she whispered then in my ear, which set me to shuddering again at the naked desire in her voice.

"Well," said Lady Margot Raines, giving me an affectionate hug as her husband was clapping John on the back. "We knew you would fetch a record price but wasn't that phenomenal? We're lucky we didn't win you. We'd be begging on the streets if we had."

I hadn't thought to ask about bride prices before. "I was high in price?" I asked.

"The record was Davida Clements, the nearest thing we have to a vid star here," said Margot with that still friendly smile. "She became Lady Gerbridge ten years ago for seven million. I only fetched four hundred thousand and Judy, five hundred thousand, when she walked the circle. Anyone over a million must be a raving beauty and is a hot news item for months. I can't believe what sort of a sensation you are going to be at every reception anywhere on the planet you care to attend. Every man is going to want to dance with you, you know, and every woman is jealous of you right now."

I glanced over at her consorts. "Poor Judith," I said.

Margot sighed. "Good job for you, though," she said. "Judy's got a thing for women, you know, though Connor and I try to temper it a little. We'll have to find her another girl soon, though, with tastes like hers, or she'll drive us both crazy."

The Lord Protector's consorts were all over me with hugs and kisses. "What a price!" said a delighted Lady Ursula, hugging me first. "And to John McDonald of all people. I'm so glad he shaved his beard. You would have been quite right to refuse his kiss if he still had that silly beard on, wouldn't she, Ellie?"

Lady Elinor agreed. The Lord Protector arrived and agreed. As soon as all the brides had arrived and had time to eat, he claimed the first dance with me. I had to dance with my husband and all the lords of the court, including a grinning Lord Connor Raines. "Thank goodness I didn't beggar myself. Your beauty overwhelmed me," he went on and on. "Should have stopped earlier. Sorry to have pushed John so far."

I danced with Gavan Borton, Lord Stanwich's son as well. He would love to show me round his space shuttle some time, he said eagerly, as I led him on shamelessly. He so wished his father could have met my price. If he had, we could be cruising the outer gas giants already. Then his smile lessened and I turned as my husband came to claim me.

John McDonald scowled at the boy and possessively took my arm. "Practicing a little sedition, are we?" he murmured as he smiled, guiding me through the applauding throng to the waiting car. What could I say? The ploy I might try was very obvious.

"Not sedition," I said lightly as he handed me into the car; my legs and garters were exposed again as light bulbs flashed all around us. "More like seduction."

"With a boy like that?" he asked in surprise as the car took off and this time we headed out of the settlement to the thopter port at the edge of town. The number of armed guards surprised me. I saw many glances at me as we went out to the waiting passenger shuttle. Amber was smiling in the doorway of the conveyance and I was treated like delicate china entering the aircraft.

Amber fussed over me and my hair and my wrap, buckling me in so that I had a view of the lights of St Duncan's Castle and the surrounding residences as we took off for the Shannon valley and the future home of Lady Caroline McDonald. Me.

VIII. HONEYMOONED

We landed inside a fortress. Lord John came from the front of the thopter where he had been talking almost continually on the radio during our flight.

“Welcome to Shannondale,” he said with a dour smile, going first down the steps to the landing pad.

There was a huge turnout to greet us, almost all staff and workers in the towers that surrounded where we had landed. I was greeted effusively with hugs by the women, almost all in dresses of black and green, the colors of the Baron of Shannon. That was the official title of Lord John McDonald. I was now the Baroness and women curtsied to me and men bowed.

“We saw you on the vid,” so many said. “But you are so much more beautiful in person.”

John put his arm about me as I shivered in the night air. He guided me to huge, golden oak doors which the guards opened for us as we approached. I could see them eyeing my legs and garters as my dress swirled about me even though I tried to walk in very tiny steps in my high heels. We entered into a great hall but I was given no time to look about as Lord John ushered me up the staircase that ran beside the great hall and to the landing and passageways above. He directed Amber and another woman about where to take my clothes and directed me to his study.

The man I knew as ‘Lt. E. Taggart’ was sitting beside the desk and, though he turned his head to look at me, he did not rise as I entered the room as I had got used to men doing to me at all the receptions I had attended.

“Twenty-two million?” Taggart sneered at John McDonald after he had firmly closed the door and was striding over to his golden oak desk. I was left to stand uncertainly in the middle of the room, my dress shimmering about me.

“Raines made his point,” said my husband, flicking on the console at his desk. He sat down and let me stand there as he studied me.

“You know Taggart,” he said to me. I shivered inside, trying very hard not to let any fear or consternation show on my face. “From now on, he is your security.” He turned to Taggart.

“You see her slipping in here all alone and you kill her,” said my husband, eyeing me warily. “You see her with any kind of comm device that you didn’t give her and you kill her.”

Taggart looked at me and smiled for the first time and I felt cold chills running through me. “And Gavan Borton,” said Lord John, looking at me intently. “He is not to be alone with her. If he pulls Stanwich rank on you, arrange an accident for him. We don’t want a white knight charging in to rescue her, do we?”

Taggart smiled even more broadly. “I could have saved you millions,” he said softly.

“We still have need of her living nannies,” said my husband, looking at me. “She’ll be examined again tomorrow. I want answers to the little problems we’re having in Lannan.”

Taggart grunted and looked disappointed.

John turned the screen and pointed to the message composed there. I recognized it right away and my heart sank. It was a routine message to a shop on Frank Station asking for a list of goods. But on the last line, it said, "Lifewater is expensive here. Only if you can obtain it at less than twelve Nebulan credits should you ship it."

"That is the right key word, isn't it?" asked my husband with a little smile. "Agent in place and is making progress on main problem."

I was numb. Who could have given him such a code? Colach and I had agreed on signifiers in a session where only the two of us had been present. She had betrayed me? But why send me out in the first place if she had? How else could John McDonald have gained access to code words that only Lady Myra and myself were supposed to know?

"I've already been contacted for a report," John McDonald said, looking me up and down. "A trader in comfort girls relayed the message to me. I guess the Nebula Kingdom is in the pimping business now."

I hated him. He mocked me every time he opened his mouth if he wasn't threatening me. He was not going to wake up one of these days, I thought, clenching my hands; my painted fingernails dug into my palms. I thought about how I could blind him, how I could dig out his carotid artery, smother him, drown him or even be the tearful wife as he fell from the battlements after showing me his domains. Lord John McDonald, I thought, you are living on borrowed time.

I was quite calm as he took me from the databook-filled office to our bedroom. He dismissed the giggling maids. I stood there as he tossed his jacket on a chair and got out of his boots and socks.

"You can undress," he said coolly, laying back on the bed and watching me.

The bastard knew I always had help from my maid every evening. I lifted my leg onto a commode at the end of the bed. "Not the garters," he said, gesturing to me to leave them on. "The groom does those."

He wouldn't let me sit down. It didn't take me long to figure out that he was getting his jollies from watching me strip. I swayed my hips then and half turned, wiggling my rounded rear as I slipped my shoulder straps down my bare arms. I took my time to undo my bodice at the back of the dress. Soft silks fell down my stocking legs as I undid my petticoats and let them fall. I stepped out of those and stood before him in my bra, panties, stockings and high heels. Oh, yes, and my garters.

I was a man standing in front of another man and he looked at me and all he saw was a shapely, nubile woman. I could feel my face burning as my emotions soared. I hated him but what could I do? I shuddered inside as he made me act more and more like a woman and watched me intently. Would he smack my bottom again if I made a slip? I almost choked on the nausea I felt as I remembered what he had done to me on Frank Station.

I took my time and very slowly took off my bracelets, my anklet, my necklace and my earrings. I was shaking so much inside but delaying only seemed to intensify what I felt. My hair was full of pins and ropes of jewels and I had to find them all and brush through my hair, was it a hundred times, until it was completely free and falling loosely about my

face. I had to cream off my makeup and wash my face as he watched me, not saying a word. He didn't say anything as I stalled and stalled. He just let the tension rise and waited until I ran out of things to do.

I kicked off my high heels and then slowly took off my bra. I had deliberately not looked at him. I glanced over and felt a lump grow in my throat. He had taken his shirt off. He had slipped beneath the sheets of the huge canopy bed and I hadn't noticed. I shook my hair, fluffing it out and went to get in the bed, my breasts bouncing on my chest. Oh, please, I thought, if there are gods and goddesses, let him just turn over and let me be.

"Uh uh," he said hoarsely. "The panties and stockings, too." He moved over to the center of the bed and stared at me. I loosened my stockings slowly and had shivery feelings pass through me as I eased them off my smooth, bare legs. He just stared at me. My heart was beating faster as I coyly turned away and pushed my panties down over my hips. I eased them past my garters and turned to face him so that he could see that I had not a hair on my body.

He directed me with hand motions. I had to raise my hands and spread my legs so that he could see that I was hiding nothing from him. I quivered inside as he demeaned me. He knew I was a man. He knew I had had a nanotech transformation. So I looked like a woman on the outside. He knew I was a man on the inside. I burned in every nerve on my body at how he was treating me. He turned back the bedsheets and he was naked too. He had dark body hair, lots of it.

"Get in," he said and so I did and my husband took me to wife. He reached out and took my hair in his hands, stroking it about my shoulders and then he pulled my face to his and began to kiss me.



“How do you like kissing another man?” he asked as he pulled me beneath him and I felt how aroused he was.

“As much as you do,” I answered as he kissed my cheek and then my neck. I was going to hate it. I was going to hate him but I knew I had to go through with it to get out alive. Besides, I had already slept with a man, hadn't I? I tried to think of Rohan and I felt like I was betraying him as my body was aroused by a man touching me as if I was a woman. Somehow each touch seemed to take all strength from my arms and I just hung on, waiting for the next strange, enervating emotion.

John grunted and began to kiss my chest, rousing my nipples as his hands caressed my hips and stomach. His mouth began to work on my stomach and then on my navel. In no time, he was kissing my abdomen and then he went lower. He explored my female parts with his tongue and I would have loved to have had something male, as I once did, to ram in his face but his tongue was doing strange things to me. There was part of me he touched and it was as if he had my penis in his mouth and I almost jumped a foot high with the feelings it gave me.

Then his fingers were in me as well as his tongue, moistening me as I wriggled beneath him. He eased up on me, his hands caressing my legs and his manhood possessed me. He put my hands on it and directed me to place him inside me. He kissed my breasts and my face and then began to ride me as I writhed under him, the heat of my skin almost unbearable.

I somehow was so aroused that I wanted him. I cooperated feverishly with his kisses and put my arms about his neck, urging him to make my breasts harder, caressing him frantically, pressing my legs tighter about him.

“Never dreamt you'd be taking it like this from another man, did you?” he asked as I began to spasm and claw at him to make him take me more deeply, more fiercely.

“Bastard!” I screamed as I could not stop at all. He had aroused the femaleness in me and I wanted him desperately. I wanted him to take me as a man takes a woman. I wanted it, wanted it, wanted it, and I exploded, kissing him and crying, rolling over with him. He began to palp my rear as I rode him, my sensitive breasts caressing his chest and mouth in turn as he moved me up and down on him easily and I felt him getting hard inside me.

Then he came and we kissed and kissed. I wouldn't let him up though he tried. I let my scented hair fall about his face. I tweaked his hard, little nipples and stroked his legs and he rose to his task again. I took his hand as I kissed him, almost swallowing his tongue, and made him explore my breasts slowly and in detail until the nipples were hard and erect as he was inside me.

Then I let him roll me over and put my legs high about him, up to his shoulders so that his trembling mouth could kiss them as well and his hands could fondle me between my thighs.

I made him work for it. He got moist kisses whenever he flagged. Soon he was pouring himself again into me and I loved it. I told him so as I cuddled into the arms of my exhausted husband. I could feel his heart pounding in his chest and so I kissed him some more, possessively.

“Please, Caroline,” he groaned as I put my hand on his wet, flaccid member. “Enough, woman.”

“Woman?” I breathed in his ear. “Woman now, is it? Can you make it with a woman, my husband? Or do you have to think of me as a man to come inside me?”

I thought I had gone too far as he bounced up in the bed, pulling away from me. I was certain I was going to be spanked again at the least. There was a long silence.

“I apologize,” he whispered finally, staring down at me. He put his hand on my thighs. “I apologize for any remarks I have made that have implied that you are not a woman. You are most definitely a woman, Caroline. Oh yes, you are a woman, aren’t you? And worth every penny of the twenty million I had to pay for you.”

“Well, thank you, milord,” I said, laying back on my gorgeous, curly hair, my bare breasts thrusting up into the air. “I love it when any man, even my husband, pays me compliments.”

“Shush,” he said. “No more flippancy. No more taunts. I was being deadly serious. From now on, you are my woman, my wife.”

As I might have expected, he wanted me again. He had shown me his inclinations from the start as his tongue had gone straight for my naked vagina. I hated doing it, but I didn’t let him see that. I roused him with a long session of taking his manhood in my mouth and he made it doubly pleasurable by taking me in a similar way at the same time. He stroked and kissed my inside thighs as he made me come, squeaking and crying, as I tried to bring him on but he had to penetrate me again, with me desperately mounting him, before he came for a third time. I cuddled up to him inside his arms and legs, getting him to hug and caress my naked body until he fell asleep first.

Oh, what a good girl I am, I thought as I snuggled to him, tracing his strong muscles with my soft, feminized hand. I examined his manhood and remembered the veiny, little thing that had served me for so long. John had a thick penis and I had felt pleasure from him the moment that he had touched me. Was that why I hadn’t been able to hold onto a woman in the relationships I had had? Size didn’t matter, the doctors said. Can I get nanobodies to just work on that part of my anatomy, I wondered. When I become a man again, I thought, snuggling up to my husband and tickling his penis, I am going to have one just like the man who has made me feel satisfied as a woman.

IX. WIVED

Lady Caroline McDonald had few duties. She had to look gorgeous, be affectionate with her husband in public and private, and take up feminine pursuits. At first, I thought dancing, dress designing and dressmaking, frillying up Shannondale with three gushing, cloying, female ‘interior beauticians’ to help me, playing croquet with the Ladies’ Social Club and making appearances at every women’s gathering in the valley and Ten Wives area, would drive me crazy. I admit it. I was thinking, it would drive a *man* like me crazy.

But it wasn’t me who was driven crazy first. I saw the signs on Taggart of his complete fretfulness as I couldn’t, really I couldn’t, decide which curtains would look best in the

guests' bedrooms. It gave me the idea and so I became even more gushing than Aileen Semple, my interior designer.

I was even more cloying than Betty Gardner, my social secretary, and, of course, I just had to have Edwin's (I'd found out my security's full name by playing a name-that-man coquette's game with my most enthusiastic, giggling companions) assistance and opinion on every little thing, particularly the new lingerie I was thinking of purchasing. After all, he had known my husband much longer than I had and he could surely tell me whether the purple bustier was better than the red teddy with my new, short dresses.

Even John laughed with me in bed as I regaled him with the embarrassments I intended to put my security through the next day. "You'd better be careful," he warned me as I cuddled up to him to convince him that I was thoroughly feminized now and in love with him. It was fun devising new ways that he could love me. He loved to take me roughly by surprise and from behind. I knew that walking away from him could lead to an attack at any moment.

There was something about my quivering rear-end in the air, my skirts thrown up above me and my panties pulled down over my hips and garter belt that turned him on.. I learned to groan as if he was really pleasuring me. Well OK, so most of it *wasn't* an act. There was no reason why I shouldn't get some fun out of this body he and his cohorts had given me, I said to myself, as I murmured to him to come on and pump me harder and harder.

He loved to kiss me and tease me, telling me what a wonderful woman I was, but all the time I could hear in his praises exactly what he wasn't saying. As I arched my back for him and wiggled my body to accommodate his fantasies, I could only think of him sneering at me and asking me how it felt to take another man, another man (!), as if I was a woman. Some man you are, I thought as I opened my mouth and let his tongue explore me, leaning back on my cushion of curly hair. You know what I am and you get pleasure out of doing this to me.

I deliberately wore the skimpiest of bras and panties in front of John. I didn't tell him that they turned me on as they did him; so did the wide variety of bustiers and corsets I wore to show off my womanly figure. He loved assaulting my cleavage in my tightest corsets as he furiously made love to me. I encouraged him as if he was giving me the greatest pleasure in the world as he humped me. He didn't have to know in truth that he was.

"You will go too far with Taggart," he whispered as I pulled him down on top of me, my hands energetically raising his manhood to readiness for pleasing me again.

"My husband will protect me," I murmured as I squeezed his sides with my upraised knees

"Tag thinks it is all an act with you," he went on, stroking my breasts as I used his hardness to delight my sensitive outer skin. There was one spot, oh, there it was, and I was lost in ecstasy for a while as I aroused myself. Then he forced his way into me and all talk had to cease as both of us gave up rational thought for a while in the ecstatic pleasure of our lovemaking. It was one of the greater ones and I couldn't help the frenzied way I writhed beneath him, urging on his hands, his mouth and his member to captivate me completely. Oh, I loved my orgasms and he did, too; my intense agitation encouraged him

to come more and more and deeper and deeper until my spasms and convulsions left me weak and clinging to him, shaking everywhere as I clung to him, gasping how much I loved him.

“If you love me so much, Caroline,” my husband said laughingly as I squeezed his emptied manhood, not letting it retract from me, “please leave Taggart alone. I would hate to lose you both. If he strangles you with a garter belt you’ve tried on him, yes, he told me about that, I’d have to hang him from the gibbet on the main gate.”

That sobered me up. I had been skipping lightly about the grounds, the guards grinning at me as I twirled and danced in my new ball gown, seeing how far out the skirts would flare. I wanted to see who was tantalized at the sight of my frilly garter belt and panties, but my petticoats didn’t flare enough, though they swirled about my stockings, and made me feel very womanly as my hair flowed about me.

Then I saw the skulls with the bits of hair attached to them. I went along the row and saw that some still had flesh on them and I stopped, looking up at them.

Aileen Semple came behind me and put her arm about my corseted waist. “I don’t know why they still do that in this day and age,” she said as I counted twelve skulls and heads over the gate.

“Who were they?” I asked, shivering as I thought how, one day, it could be *my* bones that rested there.

“Rebels and spies,” replied Aileen. “You arrived just a month after the last trials. The poor men up there supported the Carty Uprising in this settlement. It’s not very many, really. There were hundreds at Duncansford but they swept them out to the Beggars’ Pit when they announced your bridal auction.”

“It wasn’t just me who was auctioned off,” I said.

“No,” said the older, fussy, very overdressed older lady, turning me back onto the winding stone path across the Outer Ward. “But it will always be remembered as that. Twenty-two million! We always knew that Shannon was the richest barony...but to pay so much. Have you planned what you will do with your ten million? I did hear the Lord Protector’s new university has been started in Duncansford. It’s been held up for so long but now the Protector’s Purse has the money thanks to you. And to Lord John, of course.”

I knew she was babbling on to take my mind off the barbarous skulls on the gate. She couldn’t know how often I had seen such barbarisms in my travels for the Nebula Kingdom.

“And Lord Raines,” Aileen went on. “Who knew he had that level of money to bid on you as well? It must be all that galactic money that’s behind the mills and dams of Lannan.” She sighed. “It’s such a shame what they’ve done to the plain and the hill valleys. All those dams. All that power they use. The whole landscape is dying with what they vent onto the earth out there. Most unhealthy it must be for the workers. It used to be such a pretty holding, too. Ah well, it is progress, I suppose, and they have confined all the digging to the Black Country Valleys. Though I hear they’ll soon be expanding to Coldhaven.”

That was how I gathered information, from others' offhanded remarks. I wasn't allowed to watch the vidcasts. They were never put on in my presence. I was not to worry my pretty little head about recent history, my condescending husband said. He tried to keep me ignorant.

Lord John could not, however, stop the medtechs from Lannan coming to visit me regularly from the day after my marriage. It was either that or take me to Lannan, he told Taggart when my head security guard objected to me being exposed to outsiders. "They need to take new samples of her blood," said John. "Who knows? These might be the ones that give all of us a hundred more years of useful life. We could see the world in bloom by then."

Taggart said he would kill the first of the Congreve science officers who spoke to me. He still objected when they came for further medical checkups several weeks later when I was getting used to being Lady Caroline McDonald.

My husband laughed at him as I sat quietly in my long dress, black, with a plunging neckline. "They'll be here for twelve hours this time," he said, "working with her blood. These are scientists, Edwin, not some gossipy, backwater ladies who love to gush."

The technicians out of Lannan who had come to see me, however, couldn't help gushing about their work. Robson and Dickens were the science officers I had seen from Congreve on board the *Dagger*. They set up in what we called a hospital and were as enthusiastic as could be about projects that my husband only referred to by code names. I gathered that Mara had shocked them and that Veya was a far more acceptable solution than Gora. Drena and Lacha might work while Gerelon was still too chancy.

"Gora has been a personal favorite of mine," said my husband as I nearly nodded off as the vampire, Robson, bled me. "You don't favor it as a solution?"

"Too many surgical solutions would have to be made," said a voice I didn't recognize. It must have been the silent man they called Dickens. "If you are talking about a hundred thousand metamorphoses in a year, it isn't practical."

"We don't know Veya will work for sure," complained my husband.

"The only way to know is to try," said the Dickens voice again. "You know we have to try Veya with the most receptive of our test subjects."

"It may not work," said my husband.

"I have a bet on with my friend here," said Dickens, "that this will work if you give us your greatest co-operation, Lord John. Perhaps you would let us talk to our colleagues on Congreve."

"Oh, you don't need that," said my husband irritably as if the men had asked for that before. I wondered just how much Congreve knew about what was going on here on Carmichael. It made Colach's assessment of who had sent in substitutes and why very suspect. I wished, like Dickens, that I could get the word out as well. "We are well beyond the experimental work you have been doing in nanotechnology, you must admit. And you will return with full reports, you can be absolutely certain."

I tried to fix the code names in my mind.

“Second batch in Coldhaven,” one of them said and the other agreed, as I had faked dozing off.

“She is by far the most beautiful of them all,” said the chatty one, Robson, the blood gatherer. “Of course, the nannies were made for her specifically. And she has longurum in her as well. I’m glad we don’t have clones to have to explain.”

One asked a mumbled question. “A woman,” my husband said and I heard him going away. “There hasn’t been an incident yet and I’ve had Taggart on it all the time. All the time she’s been here, she’s never been less than the perfect wife. She wants me to please her in bed which is not what I expected. I thought she would draw back. How are the others?”

There was another mumbled reply and I longed to hear the answer, but I heard footsteps beside me and someone monitoring my drip and I went out of it for a while.

“You’ll be glad to know, Lady Caroline,” gushed the talkative one, the vampire, Robson, after I came to and was shivering in my silk nightie and negligee set. I trembled as I sipped, one-handed, on apple juice. I was still anchored to the drip. “The nannies we took from you have worked with great success. Yes, with *great* success. We are producing them by the millions now at the Lannan facility. The women of this planet will be thanking you in the years to come for their great good health.”

He had been talking to me for a long time, I knew. Was he trying to impress me, I wondered. Were pretty girls on this planet so hard to find?

“How are the prisoners from the *Upland Dagger* doing?” I asked as the second man began to inject something new into the drip they had set up after they had taken my blood. It was making me feel quite flushed.

“The prisoners?” asked Robson fearfully, glancing about suddenly as if in fear of the machines in the medical rooms reserved for the highest ruling echelon at Shannondale. Neither my husband nor Taggart were anywhere to be seen.

“The male prisoners,” I said, slurring the words as they leaned over me. Robson looked at his colleague in alarm. “The ones you already injected with my nanobodies,” I added, knowing it was all coming out as mush.

“You mustn’t ask,” whispered Robson.

“Success?” I tried to ask in a series of hushing noises.

“Oh, yes,” breathed Robson in my ear. “My Gina could be your twin sister.”

The other science officer pushed Robson back from me then and silently began to check the flow rate of the serum they were pumping into me. I had the impression that I had from the start that he was riding herd on the other, as if he was some form of security. When he leaned close to me to untangle one of the lines I had lain on quite deliberately, I took his hand and locked his thumb with mine.

“The lifewater order was in error,” I messaged on his wrist pulse.

“She knows,” he murmured but his lips did not move and I was able to lie back and rest for once. I hadn’t expected that. Not Congreve security. ‘She’ had to mean Lady Myra

Colach. Dickens was Nebula security. I had the most peaceful and profound deep sleep then; they must have introduced a sedative into the mixture pumped into me.

Oh, it was so wonderful to wake up. It was so wonderful to feel the swab on my lips and the few ice-cool drops of moisture leaking into my mouth. I shifted and could move both arms. I was free from the vampires, I thought, as I shifted and my hair shifted pleasantly with me, so soft and so long.

A soft hand squeezed more moisture into my mouth. "You can wake up any time you want to, Investigator Smit," said a very familiar voice.

I sat bolt upright and tried to open my eyes against the brightness.

"Now you should know better than to do that," said the smooth, authoritative, female voice.

The lights dimmed and my eyes focussed better. It was her. It was red-haired Lady Myra Colach sitting in the chair beside my bed. I looked around the room. The medtech I knew as Dickens was at the end of the bed, guarding the door. He gave me a slight smile and a wave of his hand.

"Where am I?" I gasped.

"We are in orbit about Nebula Prime," Lady Myra said with her familiar, tight little smile. "I came to get your report in private after Martin there called out the dogs."

"The dogs?" I asked stupidly.

"Otherwise known as twelve Hammer-class ships of the line," said Lady Myra. "Not much of Carmichael was left inhabitable, as you might guess. It will take them a generation or more to get back into space since Admiral George took out all their bases and interstellar ships. Lannan, the Shannon Valley, Duncansford, Shannondale, Wharton Vale, the Greening Mines, our ships hit them all."

"You did all that without waiting for my report?" I asked, reaching for the cool water and spraying my mouth with it. I noted that my arm was bare. I saw that I was in a nightie and I could feel that I wasn't wearing a bra as I moved. I wasn't wearing panties, either.

"You might feel that you did all this for nothing," Lady Myra began.

"Exactly right," I said hoarsely, taking more juice quickly.

"But you shouldn't," she said seriously. Colach was always serious. "You served as a lightning rod, showing us exactly who our enemies were and where they were hiding out. Is there something we missed? That Martin missed?"

"Oh yes," I said, my head hurting so. "You can tell John and Edwin that they can come in now."

There was stillness opposite me. "Who?" asked the false Lady Myra Colach, and the traitorous 'Martin' or "Dickens' or whoever he was shifted towards me. As if I could have gotten up from that bed with whatever they had pumped into me.

“Come on, John,” I said, knowing they could hear every word. “Sorry but she’ll never pass as Colach. She doesn’t even know the code words for me.”

The false Colach glared at the man by the door. “I told you we should have had lifewater ready for her,” she snapped.

Dickens said nothing as the door to the white, antiseptic room swung open and Lord John McDonald, my husband, and his favorite watchdog, Taggart, came in.

John looked at me and smiled as if he was very pleased about something. “I told you that this wouldn’t work,” he said as if continuing a conversation with Taggart. “With the care Colach is taking now, the new Congreve substitution plans don’t stand a chance. Take this one back.” He indicated the woman who was staring at him in horror. “Recover the nannies. We might be able to use them again at some later date.”

“No!” the false Colach wailed as it took the two of them, Taggart and Dickens, to haul her from the room. It seemed as if Dickens was John’s man but the tattoo he had on his thumb, like a birthmark, I had known from my earliest days in Nebula Prime’s intelligence services. It was only half a mark. Somewhere on his body, he should have the other half of the mark and I would have known then that he was genuine. Now I wasn’t sure and I felt too tired and drained to care.

John came and sat on the edge of the bed as I leaned back into the pillows, my hair floating out about me. Someone had washed my hair, I could feel, by how crinkly it was. It was longer too, I was sure of it. I felt it all down my back.

John caressed my hand and fingernails and smiled at me. He was clean-shaven and looked handsome, or rich, anyway, in his well-fitted dark blue suit and dark blue shirt. He stroked my fingernails which someone had shortened, rounded and newly painted in pink.

“How are you feeling?” he asked as if he really, sincerely, cared about me.

“How long have I been out?” I countered as he touched my hands and a queasy feeling began to arise in my stomach. How did I feel? I was angry. Angry at the trick he had tried to play on me and angrier at him having me sedated. What could have been happening that was so important that I had to be knocked out for it?

“How long?” I repeated.

“Six months,” he said regretfully.

Then I felt my stomach really churn. I sat up and swung my legs from the bed. I almost collapsed and he was there in an instant to catch me, support me and help me to the bathroom as my legs seemed so unsteady.

I made it to the sink on time, threw up and threw up. It was so confusing. I was throwing up jelly and mush. There was nothing that I had eaten recently. Then it struck me hard. He said six months. *Six months!* I had been out for another six months.

“Bastard,” I muttered as he pulled the nightie from me and turned on the shower for me but I couldn’t manage. I fell into the taps and they hurt me as I tried to stand on wobbly legs. I threw up again, missing him but he was soaked. He didn’t complain. He

stripped off his clothes and got under the shower with me, supporting me and cleaning me as I emptied myself again of the mushes they must have force-fed me for so long.

His hands were soft as he soaped my breasts and my body, even in between my legs where I noted that my pubic hair had grown back. So it was true. I had been out some time at least. He rinsed out my mouth and I cleaned my teeth, then he dried me as well as himself, my hair taking forever.

Somewhere in the drying, the drying became stroking and the stroking became so sensual that I had to use him as support. I think he kissed me first, most gently, and I kissed him back, but then I got very dizzy so my gallant husband picked me up. I was as naked as him, and he carried me back to my bed where he got in as well, sliding under me, and pulling the bed sheets over us both.

I leaned my head on his shoulder and felt him against me.

"Yes, it's been six months," he said, stroking my breasts. "Six months in which you have just been lying here, dreaming, while the rest of the world thinks that you and I have been out on a romantic, tour of the galaxy, on our honeymoon."

He kissed me again and it didn't take long for him to possess me. I didn't mind at all as my damp hair swirled about us both, making me shiver. I was gasping and wriggling on his aroused manhood when I heard the door open.

"Oh, for goodness sake," John said to someone, not stopping at all. "She is my wife, after all, and I haven't been with her for six months." After a moment, I sensed the presence, it must have been Taggart, withdraw and my husband was able to make love to me in peace.

"Caroline, Caroline," he whispered as he rolled me over and mounted me and I accommodated him by crossing my legs across his back. I clung to him as he possessed my mouth with his tongue and every part of my body with his hands. He came quickly, urgently, and would not let me stop moving as he sought to come with me again.

"So what were you dreaming of?" he asked me as he kissed my ear and I realized I did not have my earrings on. Neither did I have on my wedding band. Had he taken it away because he was about to get rid of me? Was my body no longer useful to him as a source of advanced technology? "Was it Rohan or was it me?"

"Neither," I said as he stroked my legs and my hips, sending ripples of pleasurable feelings through me. "I was dreaming of Callan Russell." He was the muscular vid star of so many space operas. Every woman I had known swooned over his image. "He was just about to rescue the princess from a fate worse than death. She had so little left to wear, nothing but a torn black bra and matching black lace, panelled panties. He lifts her from the wreckage and then he thanks her with a kiss and they kiss and they kiss and that's when you woke me up. Next time, when I dream, though, I want to be the girl."

He laughed at me and began to kiss me harder as I pulled him tighter into me. He mounted me and I rocked with him, trying to unite with him in every way that I could. He could sense my passion rising

"Why did you put me out for six months?" I blurted out through chattering teeth as I matched my movements to his. It was the deepest and most satisfying penetration I had

ever had. I loved every second of it as he sensed that I was going to spasm with him. I wriggled and writhed and he pinched my nipples and kissed me hard and I felt my convulsions, my female orgasm, start. He responded to it by hugging me even tighter as I lost control completely. "Why?" I blurted it out through bruised, loving lips.

"Because you're pregnant," he said. I felt him spurting somewhere deep inside me as I scratched my lover's back and squeezed him tightly with my long, smooth legs. It was such a tremendous pleasure to be taken like this, to know how the other half lived, so to speak. And then the words began to sink in and I could do nothing but cling to my husband, aghast.

"What have you done to me now?" I asked him hysterically.

X. BABIED

"It's impossible!" I cried at him even though he was just inches from my face. "Impossible, impossible, impossible!"

"Your surgery upset us at first," said John McDonald, kneeling over me as I lay fearfully below him. "But then we got Vanyon's notes and examples of the nanobodies he described. You know that they're already in use in the Nebula Kingdom to repair uterine and fallopian damage as it is. It's a conceit of your scientists, and Congreve's, that they don't think we can do the little modifications we need to do. We have greatly advanced what is being done by Vanyon and Gosby at Royal."

"This is no small modification, if you did it," I said, as he kissed my cheek.

"Oh, we did it," John said, looking down on me and smiling. "It would have been painful for you, though, while the nannies did their work. You know that. So you had to sleep as we tried the new nannies developed at Lannan. You are the first one on whom it has taken. After you bled menstrual blood, well, I supplied the semen and here we are. We looked inside you yesterday and confirmed that you are indeed the mother of my child and my heir or heiress."

"It's impossible!" I screamed as he rolled off my quivering body, patting my abdomen very gently. He dressed while I frantically examined myself. I did seem to be thicker in my abdomen. There was something there but it could be a tumor. Could a woman feel a baby at such a time, I wondered in panic. Could she hurt it by groping for it as I was?

I did seem different. I seemed to be moist and the mounds, the little nodes inside me, my male parts, in waiting so to speak, seemed to have disappeared in the soft linings where he had pleased me so much.

"Oh no, Caroline, you can't pluck it out," said my husband, dressing himself. He came back to me and kissed my naked body. "I'm sending you a new maid and a new beautician. Then, I'll take my wife and the mother of my heir about the very place her womanly, scheming heart has been longing to see. Yes, darling Caroline, I'll give you the grand tour of all the Lannan facilities you want to see since that is where we are. I've already announced the coming event to the news services so expect to be bombarded with requests for interviews and receptions and the like when we get back to Shannondale.

“We must bring you out as Lady Caroline McDonald. A Spring Ball will be just the thing, darling. Your social secretary will know just what to do and I’m longing to see you in one of the spring dresses the girls love to wear in our world. It’s time you were the belle of the ball at Shannondale.”

XI. ADORED

Lannan was vaster than I had imagined. It was a city surrounded by many little satellite towns. There were industries of every sort there, refineries and mills, each staffed by eager and willing men, on their best behaviour and in awe of a woman worth over twenty million. A smile at them and they were putty in my hands. I could see why Lord John had kept Lady Caroline away from this place for so long.

John had let me convalesce for a week as Betty Gardner came to gush over me and tell me how insensitive men were when we women were pregnant. She asked me when I was going to start classes and told me how John would hate attending such natal classes. Most men did.

“You can say that again,” I agreed as we walked through the finest shops in Lannan; anything I wanted was mine. But irony was lost on her. She didn’t have the context. I only knew that, if I was really pregnant and had to go through the indignities of child birth, Lord John McDonald was going to go through them with me.

The men of Lannan panted after me. I could imagine them panting after any woman. They were so eager to please that they gave me information they would never have if my husband hadn’t introduced me as his wife and the mother of his heir and not as a spy from



Nebula. Which one was the truth, I wondered, as I continued being sick in the mornings though I knew that was easy to fake.

The nanotech facility was in a battle-hardened silo that seemed to stretch on for miles under granite hills. "We have to use the subway to get about in here," bubbled the director of the project. "It's eight miles in at the deepest point."

I had thought Robson stretching the truth when he had said they were making millions of nannies here. If anything, he was underestimating. I got to see the production line and the hospital where all the eager children were lined up for their visits. I could feel that the technicians in that part of the plant were bursting in pride at how they were helping future generations to live longer.

"The longurum plant is now on line, too," Director Leweth told me as I clung to his arm and let him soak in my expensive perfume.

"I wonder where we got the recipe for that drug," I murmured and smiled at Leweth. I saw John look up from examining something on his databox.

"Oh, your husband is a marvellous man, Lady Caroline," simpered the plant director. "He is the founder of all our work. He employs only the very best of off-world scientists and has the license to use republic techniques here as well. This, by the way, is quality inspection where a batch, as you can see, is being compared to the original."

My blood, I thought, watching a technician doing the drudge work of making sure that a machine more complicated than a human being had made no error. "Quality control" it might be called but I knew it for what it was, a way to make superstitious, just-out-of-the-muck-and-mud barbarians feel that they were controlling the forward march of technology.

"And where are the prisoners treated?" I asked, moving him a little way away from my husband. The director frowned and looked at me sharply. "Oh, is that part of my husband's department, the secret part?" I asked lightly, smiling at the man and simpering on his arm.

"Oh, yes, Lady Caroline," he said, staring down the front of my dress. I had deliberately worn a low-plunging dress and a push-up bra. I did wobble still on my high heels. I had to wear them. I was now so small in comparison to all the men about me.

"We're going there next," I said brightly. "If you will lead the way."

But that flummoxed him. Next on his agenda was refreshments and there we met the first women on the tour. I noted how the guards' interest perked up right away as the neatly dressed girls came out with their trays to curtsy and serve us.

It really wasn't much of a view across the ruined valley. I was back on the arm of my husband and he winked at me and looked at my plunging neckline as well. The assistant director was going on about the plans to 'beautify' the valley as soon as funds became available when a small girl came forward to serve us, her very narrow waist accentuating her wide hips. She looked up at me with wide, blue eyes and flushed guiltily. Her hand shook as she placed the iced drink in front of me. Her blonde, curly hair was tied back in ringlets and several of the men had noticed. Her high breasts pushed forward the red

straps of her apron against her white frilly shirt. She pirouetted easily on her high heels, her skirt only as low as the middle of her pretty, stockinged calves.

The director put his hand on her thigh as she passed him and she blushed. He rose and whispered something in her ear. There was something about her. She clearly knew me for she glanced at me and blushed as she sashayed away, more men interested in her sexy, feminine walk than in the assistant director's boring lecture on future plans for the valley.

"Where do I know that girl from?" I asked my husband quietly, leaning against him so that my newly shortened but curly hair stroked his face.

"Chatty Patti," he said. "You should know her well."

It took me a moment. I was thunderstruck. "Robson?" I asked and he gave me a crooked smile. "You've done that to a Congreve agent?"

"The Congreve agent died in an unfortunate accident," my husband said smoothly. "Little Patti, though, loves her new role bringing comfort to all the hardworking staff officers here at the facility. You watch the director excuse himself now. He has a date with her in his office."

"He does?" I asked as if I hadn't noticed.

"We can go into security control and watch if you like," he murmured to me. "It will put off the duty staff, though. She apparently has a wide and growing audience, among security that is. She still talks all the time, I hear."

"Then the other waitresses?" I asked speculatively, a huge, awful knot growing in me at the base of my stomach.

"You wanted to see the prisoners," John said, turning to face me. I remembered the hard-looking, beaten-up and beaten-down prisoners whom I had seen on the *Dagger's* monitors. There wasn't a sign of them in the eager, fresh-faced girls who came to clear away our drink glasses. Many men called out to them and they all stopped demurely and curtsied to the men and nodded eagerly at whatever suggestions were being made to them.

"Comfort women?" I asked and my husband nodded.

"They don't use that term up here," he said lightly. "They're called waitresses and many of them will be married before the end of next year. We're going to let the engineers here bid on them in their own little bridal auction. Soon they'll be getting the nannies that worked so well with you. We've already outlawed the sale of birth control pills. I expect our child is going to be at the head of a boom generation."

I had sort of forgotten it. Then it hit me again. I was pregnant. I squirmed as the assistant director made reference to it and all the men present stood and toasted me.

"Will it be a boy or a girl?" asked the director as I stood and my husband took my arm.

"I don't want to know," I said shortly.

"It will be a boy," said Lord John McDonald. "What else could it be?" He adjusted my hair over my coat and guided me to the waiting subway train. We had a car to ourselves.

I watched as the Director almost ran up the steps out of the reception area back to his office.

"There goes a man who loves his job," he said, moving close to me and putting his arm about me.

"It's all a scam, isn't it?" I said. "You want something from me."

John leaned against me. He lifted my head with one hand and kissed me on my pink lipstick, not caring who was watching him or how I was covering his face with pink marks.

"What could I want from you, my Lady Caroline," he muttered, "that I don't already have with you? If the missiles do fall on us, you are going to die with me as my wife and the mother of my heir."

"Sooner or later," I murmured.

"Oh yes," he said, smiling. "You have so much time, you who were prolonged, don't you? But so does this natural, my dear. Once every qualified child has been programmed, select adults will be preserved and I am very near to the top of that list, my darling. Oh Caroline, you are going to grow old with me always beside you and our eight or ten children. Then there will be grandchildren and great-grandchildren." He kissed my wooden lips. "It's a fate you so richly deserve, isn't it?"

"Why?" I croaked.

"You were born to be a woman," he said, cuddling me to him. "I suppose you want to tell me now that you've just been acting with me but we both know differently, don't we?" His hand ran down my dress and I shivered. "You love it all, the wearing of the dresses. Everyone has remarked on it. You love showing off who and what you are. You love the attention of men. You love to flirt. We could all see that. I don't doubt you thought you were acting once but it's well beyond that now, isn't it? You don't have to act any more. You are Caroline. And, my darling, you can continue to love being her for the rest of your days."

He kissed me hard and his arm brushed my breast. "You can call me 'Bastard' again," John said. "I deserve it."

He did. He did because he had me considering it. I loved my long, rustly skirts and my tight bra, my garter belt and stockings and the incredible pleasures he gave me in bed. I loved being in his arms like this and receiving his kisses. I loved seeing my picture on the vids. I loved that the gorgeous woman was me. So often, now, they showed him kissing me. I saw girls everywhere dressing like me, wearing their hair like me. I might have been unconscious for a while but the publicity machine had rolled on. Betty said that she'd had to employ two secretaries to keep up with the mail.

Young girls wanted to talk to me and yet it was all a sham. Now John came up with this offer to make it all real. It wouldn't be a sham any more. I would be a woman, a mother. But I wasn't and I knew it. It was still all a scam. It wasn't possible because it wasn't possible that I could be pregnant. I could agree with John quite safely. It wouldn't happen in the end.

I wondered how long it would be before I 'miscarried' and how many more I would have as he kept me, Colach's investigator, in my frilly, golden cage, all thoughts of escape gone.

There were prisoner cells deep in the mountain and medshells, thousands of them. They seemed to be moving forward to 'Processing' as quickly as I had ever seen any assembly line move. In the huge amphitheatre where my husband took me, a score of lines were all moving at once.

One of the medshells was marked with a golden cross. "What is special about that one?" I asked and the smug medtechs about me suddenly froze up.

"You know of Lord Carty's rebellion," my husband said shortly and I nodded. "Well, that shell is his."

"A lord?" I asked, stupefied. "You are doing this to a baron?"

"An ex-baron," said my husband, nodding towards the grim-faced technicians coming after me. "He should have shot himself, the coward, after we gave him the chance. But he didn't. He was a charming fellow, you know. Charmed a dozen of my own guards into nearly killing me.

"No, these men don't want him dead. That would be too easy. Pretty Pauline is going to be repaying all the pain she caused with all the great pleasure she's going to give. It's beautiful really, isn't it? Can't you sense the eagerness in the men here? There are the enemies and what can those men do any more? They can entertain with their wonderful womanly bodies and they can give pleasure for generations to come until the Carty Rebellion is a distant memory. I know one woman who wants her husband back as her maid. He used to beat her, you see. She was loyal and he wasn't. She wants him as a special comfort girl, as well, for her new husband. I think that is poetic justice."

I was appalled. I looked about at the moving shells and the avid faces of the medtechs going about their quality checks.

"Is that all you can think to do," I slowly asked my husband, "with the most significant breakthroughs in medicine and genetics? You want to revenge yourself on a bunch of frustrated revolutionaries. You want to turn them into your little dolls, your little playthings?"

He hit me. My husband hit me in front of a dozen shocked and frightened scientists and medtechs. In moments, a stream of security guards came pouring through the large amphitheatre led by Taggart. Who else would it be?

"So now I get to do it," Taggart gloated and I looked along a cutter beam to his fingers on the stud, about to press it.

"No!" gasped my husband, picking me up and cuddling me to him, my dress rustling about him as he tried to kiss my face but I wouldn't let him have my lips.

I didn't care. I felt extraordinarily cool. "Let him kill me," I said quietly, aware that everyone was listening to me. "This is insane. I don't want to be married to a madman any more."

Let him kill me. Let him tell all the media phony stories about how I died. The story would get out.

“Bastard,” he murmured. “You provoked me. You were just waiting for an opportunity like this, weren’t you?”

He still held me. He motioned to a man, Dickens I realized, and yelled, “Take her into the security office and secure the tape of this room! Tag, you know what you have to do.”

There was a grunt then and suddenly shouting and pleading started; then there was the stench of burned flesh cut short by the security office door closing behind me.

“Oh heck,” said a man at the security console, standing as Dickens swept me into the security office. He didn’t have a chance to say more as Dickens’ beam cut his head from his body.

I looked on the console and Taggart was walking about the amphitheatre putting shots into each of the quivering corpses on the floor.

“Here,” said Dickens handing me the cutter beam he had taken from the dead man. “You know how to use it.” He lifted his pant leg and showed me a little scar. His hand beside it completed the mark. I hadn’t been wrong. He was one of Myra Colach’s deep cover agents in the Republics.

“We can’t get out along the subway,” I said, frying the console after he had extracted a thin data spool from the device.

Dickens grinned at me. “We have to go up,” he said. “There are emergency thopters on standby. I think we can hitch a ride.”

“Why now?” I asked, kicking off my ridiculously high heels, stuffing them down my dress, and running after him. I hadn’t run before and it was awful how my skirts dragged at my legs and my breasts moved up and down as if I had sacks on my chest. He waited for me at the exchange doors as we ran down narrow hallways that sloped upwards I realized, as my legs began to tire and my lungs to burst.

An alarm sounded in the distance and the interior fire doors began to close. He jammed one with his cutter beam and pulled me through, the lower part of my dress catching. He tore it loose and exposed my legs, my stockings, my petticoats and, at times my panties and garter belt. He smiled at me. “Callan Russell rescues the beautiful maiden in her skimpy little dress,” he said. “And yes, this time you can be the maiden.”

Footsteps sounded in the passageway ahead and two men came running towards us. “Stop right there,” snarled one, pointing a stun rifle at Dickens.

“Oh, thank goodness you’ve saved me,” I cried, mincing forward towards them and they both looked pleased with themselves. I only needed a few feet to get in range and then I blasted both of their heads to pieces. Oh, it felt good. I wanted to do it again.

Dickens grabbed the rifle. “Come on,” he said, searching through one bloody uniform to acquire some kind of pass. He looked at it and smiled crookedly. “We need his hand to get by the gate,” he said. I cut off his arm with the beam and picked it up as he had a rifle in each hand.

There was a sentry post ahead of us and several men there. I could see the glint of barrels and beams pointed our way. Dickens pulled me in behind a huge vent.

“Will we still need this?” I asked him, holding up the bloody arm.

"Yes," he said. "The door is set in a ferromesh screen."

He tore off more of my petticoats and daubed blood from the dripping arm on my legs and across my heaving breasts. Then he kissed me and zing, it happened again, just as it had been when Rohan had kissed me. I clung to him as he held onto to my rear and pressed me to him.

"I've wanted to do that since I first saw you in that dingy freighter," Dickens said, stroking me and I wanted to kiss him some more, I was so aroused.

"You can scream like a girl, can't you?" he asked, patting me on my chest, squashing my shoes against me. "So now, Caroline, put your shoes on and run towards them as if I am chasing you."

I kissed him for luck, put on my high heels, kissed him again for double luck and then ran clickety-click up the passageway towards the men behind the mesh. I squealed like a girl. And I could hear him running behind me, cursing and calling on me to stop or he would shoot.

I kept screaming and crying and waving the bloody arm and the guards didn't shoot, not even when I came right up to the door. I didn't need the arm after all as one of the guards opened it and they all started firing at the low air vent Dickens had dived behind.

The guard pulled me behind the firing guards, grinning as he looked down at my skimpy costume. He should have looked more closely at the petticoats in my other hand. I zapped him first and then swept the crouching row of shooters with the beam. Only one of them lived, just long enough to be finished off by Dickens as he ran up to the security door. The outer doors led to cold, fresh air and a narrow valley with a well-worn path that led to a fuel tank and a landing platform with a thopter in position, slowly turning its wings.

The guard didn't have a chance as a half-naked woman came walking forward to him begging him to "Save me! Save me!" looking over her shoulder in search of her pursuer. The pilot jumped out the other side as Dickens charged around the aircraft. He jumped over the rocks and though we both fired down the slope at the falling figure, I don't think we hit him. He might have survived. But I doubt it.

Dickens took the pilot's seat and I put the harness on for the guns. He laughed at me as we slowly began to rise. "You should see the view from here," he laughed. "Lady Caroline, you are turning me on!"

I knew it. My stockings were holed but they stayed in place because of my garters. My bra was still in place, though one strap was bothering my elbow. My skirt was what was left of one silk petticoat, barely covering my red, shiny panties. I opened up on the passageway we had just come through as more men began to pile around the corner. I hoped my husband or my head of security was in the group because I must have blown ten of them apart. Then suddenly we lurched forward and I swung in the harness, my shots going wild and all over the mountain that loomed behind us.

A huge red fireball showed where a lucky, stray shot hit a fuel tank and Dickens let out a yelp. "Star-girl! It's you!" he crowed and I blushed with pleasure. Danni Coronni, who

played Star-girl, was the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. I loved every one of her of her vid features.

We zoomed away and turned into another valley, Dickens keeping us on a course close to the contours of the valley. We hopped over a wall and then did it again, evergreens swishing by just below us. I was thrown all over the place as we took evasive action. Dickens kept looking back at me and grinning and I looked down. I had burst right out of my bra and my breast was exposed to him. *Men*, I thought, as he looked back at me again as if fixing my wanton image in his mind. Didn't men think of anything else but sex, I thought, as we went hurtling over the tree tops. Then he looked up at me again and smiled and I was glad that he couldn't think of too much else.

XII. COSSETED

Dickens dropped me off on the shoreline with his jacket about me to keep me warm. Then he dropped the thopter into Lake Rascallon near to Cartmoor, the home of Lord Carty, the leader of the last rebellion. I worried that he might be sucked under with the craft and when he didn't appear for a while, I thought he had drowned. Then I saw a dark shape skimming easily over the water and he came ashore on a shallower beach than where he had left me.

He stopped and looked at me as I skipped over the rocks to meet him, my shoes in the pockets of his jacket.

"What?" I asked fearfully, looking around for any danger.

He just smiled at me. He had wonderfully straight teeth but then everybody did on my home world. It had taken some getting used to that there were so many 'naturals' on Carmichael. "You can't see yourself," he said as he began to take off his wet clothes. "With your hair blowing in the wind and your clothes all torn and your garters and panties showing through. Caroline, you're the poster girl for a heavy feelie vidcast."

I blushed and handed him his jacket as he dried himself by rolling in the long grass, finally taking off his underpants and wringing them out. "No, don't touch me," he said, shivering with the cold. "If you touch me, I'm going to embarrass myself in front of you."

"So embarrass yourself," I said, jumping in the water, rolling in it to wash the blood and other stuff off. My breasts were quite free and I watched as I played the vamp, pouting at him. "I can't get out of here without you."

I put my arms about him as he came for me and pulled me out of the freezing lake water. I didn't find it embarrassing at all that he kissed me. Oh heavens, I thought, what is wrong with me? I was alone with a man and I immediately started doing what any woman would do with a naked man. I should have been embarrassed but I wasn't.

I didn't find it at all embarrassing that he showed me very quickly how much he wanted me. I didn't think at all about what I really was. Well, I did, actually. I was a woman who had been rescued by her white knight and he deserved every bit of his reward. It warmed him up remarkably to wrestle with me in the long grass, my hair across our faces as he explored me as a man does a woman. I was on fire and he accepted the gift of the warmth I gave him.

"Twenty million credits," he murmured as I rolled on him and caressed him with my hard, erect breasts. Who knew where my bra had gone? I loved kissing and biting his ear playfully as he thrust agonizingly slowly into me. "I would have paid twice as much if I could have bid," he added, speeding up at just the right moment, making my pleasure increase by leaps and bounds.

That only made me want him even more. He came in a frenzy and then had to work his well-shaped buns off to make me come as I wanted to. It was glorious when he did rouse me with his gentle hands and I rolled with him, my panties and clothing long gone.

He kissed me as I trembled in the patted down grass nest we had made. It would take me minutes to recover from the ecstasy he had given me. "You aren't really pregnant, are you?" Martin Dickens asked me.

"I don't think so," I whispered, pulling on my panties. I lay back and pulled his hand over my slim waist and up to my still engorged breasts. "John says that I am. But you know the scam he ran before. You were part of it."

Dickens nodded. "I suggested it," he said. "It was that or join Patti. I could have been your twin sister," he said with a grimace and shook his head. "Whatever did you say to him that made McDonald react like that?"

I told him. He shook his head again as he pulled on his wet pants and dry jacket. "It is insane," he said. "But what's worse is that it works. It's this stupid, frigging planet."

I tied what was left of my underclothes about my breasts and he shook his head as he looked at me. "You'll be raped the minute anyone sets his eyes on you," he said.

"So will you go into a settlement and find us a place to stay?" I asked. "A room at an inn with a big bed?" I purred into his ear.

"You don't understand this place at all, do you?" he asked, holding me and kissing me again, his hands stroking my hips and panties.

"What do you mean?" I asked, leaning into him, my breasts soft and bouncy against his muscular chest.

"If we went in to a settlement, what do you think we would find?" Martin asked. "We would find men, only men. A few privileged settlements have comfort women who live in what I would call prisons. There are no children, no family life. All that exists in just the most privileged places of all, the baronies. The men are desperate for women. One look at you and they would kill me and line up to rape you."

"The rebellions?" I asked.

"They happen every ten years or so and the ones not killed are packed off to the north," he said, gathering his wet clothes and our armaments together and leading me off the grass and into the woods. "Some make it back by dugout and wander the wild areas... and there are a lot of wild areas on this planet."

"It's barbaric," I shuddered.

"The dumping makes it worse," Dickens went on. He had boots at least, but he stopped in a rocky place and carried me over the sharp outcroppings, getting a grateful

kiss as his reward. I *liked* kissing him. He wasn't domineering and in charge all the time like my husband.

We paused by a stream and I got a look at myself as I knelt for a drink of water. All my makeup was gone and I had tied my hair back with strips from my underclothing. I was using my stockings as a belt to carry my gun and I did truly look like Star-girl. The nannies had made me into a shapely woman and it had carried over into my face. My lips were full and pink even without makeup. My features were slim and feminine and my eyelashes thick and dark. My eyebrows were only a hint on my flat, smooth forehead. When I stood, I couldn't help but notice how wide my hips were and how the bikini-like panties made my legs look longer.

"Stop admiring yourself and help me make a fire," said my last lover, coming over to put his hands about me.

"There's already one inside me," I whispered, having to stand on tiptoe to kiss him, caressing his strong muscles as I did so.

"Where I will be very soon," he whispered back. "But we have to attend to other measures first and we need warmer clothes."

"Speak for yourself," I went on, pulling him against me. I don't know what it was but I wanted him again so intensely and nothing mattered but that he make love to me once more.

"I can't," he began as my mouth closed over his and I pulled him down beside the river. But he could and he did. When I spasmed this time, he thought I was having a fit. But he enjoyed it just the same, as I was totally spent with passion and ecstasy. I felt so free. It must have been all the men I had killed that day. Oh, I hoped that one of them had been Lord John McDonald.

"You know where we are going?" I asked as I piled tinder and kindling in the little fire pit he had dug out and lined with rocks back in the trees.

"Carty smuggled weapons in from off-planet," Martin said. "My chatty little colleague and I brought in the last shipment, too late, along with the nanotech production robots, Nebulan prototypes directly from New Vienna and the Royal Hospital itself. The Congreves I work for haven't a clue what's really going on. Robson and I were really Nebula Kingdom science officers. We thought we were going to be setting up some of the planetary elite for prolongation drugs. It's a good cover for what they were doing. McDonald has been using Terrans all along as advisers. They like it here. One of them is even the new Lord Carty."

"So?" I asked.

He smiled. "Some of the Terrans want to go home," he said, "with their money and their bodies intact. Cartmoor has always been the regular transport base for the planet, as Lannan is so busy with industrials. Those who profited by selling guns to Carty and information to McDonald still have their pipeline open. They expect me one day on the run, and will help in getting me back to Congreve. You, though, I am going to have to do a lot of fast talking about. They will recognize you."

I nodded glumly as the fire burst into flame and we both fed it with dry twigs and sticks I had found. "If just one of us gets off, it would be fine," I said. "Maybe I should disappear for a while into the forest." Once I had been able to survive for a week alone in a Shuppino bog, living on snakes and frogs. Carmichael was much easier to live off the land. I knew that.

"We stay together," he said, arranging his clothes about our little fire. "You know who the traitors were, don't you?" I hadn't expected him to make his interest so obvious. Was he scamming me again? Could I trust anyone on this god-forsaken planet? "So, you have to report," he said, adding to the fire and studying the sky. "They all thought I was Congreve's man on the spot up till now but after I grabbed you, I'm sure your husband has it all worked out, Caroline."

"Oh yes," I said bitterly. He turns men into women and solves his planet's problems.

"Now, I'm going to hunt down river where all those birds are flying," Dickens said. "When I return, my woman will have a spit ready and a soft bed for her weary man to fall into."

"Not too weary," I said. "I can hunt too."

He smiled broadly at me. "I am the man," he said. "I hunt. You are the woman. You cook."

I lifted up my legs and showed him my feet. "Barefoot and pregnant?" I asked, laughing at him as he flexed and did a weightlifter's pose for me.

He looked up my legs to the brief red cloth covering my female parts. He reached out to stroke my legs and then shook himself and almost ran off into the brush.

We had to cover ourselves with branches of leaves to keep warm that night which made moving quickly decidedly prickly. But we managed. He liked me being the initiator of our love play but he knew a few tricks of his own to drive me crazy without entering me. I'd heard men talk of their magic fingers before but I didn't do much of that myself as a man. I certainly learned from Martin how to rouse a woman to a surprising climax without entering her. I couldn't wait to try it out on my next conquest, who would have to be a girl like me, I thought. Then I wondered what I was thinking.

XIII. RESCUED

We heard thopters overhead all the next day as we slipped through tangles of old growth; I wore his jacket to protect me as we went through ugly brambles. We were both very scratched by the time we came to the first tilled field we had seen in days. I stood off to one side and watched the robot weeders and tenders work through rows of some kind of sugar beet.

Martin said it was the way I was standing, just my panties peeping out, as I stood on my tiptoes and tried to see if there was anyone working the machines in the fields. That's why he took me then and that's how three of them were able to sneak up on us as my lover ravaged me and made me ride him until he was so tired and exhausted he could put up no fight when they came out of the trees.

One of the men, tall, sunburned and bearded, took off his belt and advanced on me, his knife motioning me to get off my stunned lover. His erection was enormous. His intent was obvious.

"It's that Lady Caroline," said the man on the right with what looked like a wrench in his hands.

"Makes no never mind," grunted the bigger man, seizing me by my wrist.

"Let go," I pleading, rising from the warm, ecstatic loving I had just been enjoying, to this ugliness.

"He must be the Nebula spy who kidnapped her," said the man on the left, holding the stun rifle like a club.

"Don't be an idiot, Gurry," said the tall man, pulling me towards him and grinning at me. "You saw what she was doing. He's no kidnapper and we're all dead men with our skulls on Cartmoor Gate if we ever let on what we saw. So I'm going to get me twenty-two million credits worth of fun out of this beauty before we let them know where to find her body."

"They'll know, Tem," said the thin, sandy-haired guy as the older man ran his hands over my breasts and sighed. He put his hands in my crotch and his eyes rolled at the pleasure he was getting.

Martin had complained of the cutter beam at my waist as he caressed me. I had undone my belt and laid it in the grass as we rolled around, exciting and pleasuring each other.

The big man threw me down right on top of the beam. He spread my legs wide.

"Me next," said the man on the left, giggling as I cried and begged the big man, Tem, not to rape me. I rolled and found the beam the right way up.

Tem made a huge thrust at me as I tried to wriggle away from him. He grabbed my hair and when I raised the beam I was off again because I severed his arm. Blood spurted over us both as he screamed in pain. He clutched at the place where his missing arm had been and I drove a beam through his heart. The man on the left tried to get the rifle to bear on me but I blew his head off. Then I had to struggle with the bleeding body on top of me as Gurry took off into the tilled field.

"Well," said Martin, standing and then taking the stun rifle from the headless man's lifeless hands. He was wobbling with exhaustion. The poor man. I think he had just been on the point of filling me up again, so to speak, when I had been so roughly pulled from him. "We have to catch that guy."

The farmers often had fights outside the settlements, he'd told me earlier. But they didn't kill people with cutter beams and stun rifles. We had to find this Gurry, kill him and hide the bodies.

I dug a pit while the 'hunter' went looking for his prey. He didn't find him and we had to content ourselves with burying two would-be rapists, stealing their clothes and boots and heading on a plant conveyor towards Cartmoor.

It was amazing how I felt in a man's rough shirt and pants again. We tried to put my hair up under a cap in the conveyor cabin but I just had too much hair.

“Are you sure?” Martin asked doubtfully as I gave him the hand pruning shears from the emergency manual kit on the conveyor.

“I’m going to be myself again soon,” I said. “I’ve had short hair before.”

Martin lopped off the bulk of my long hair. Seeing it so curly and lightened by whatever the beauticians did gave me shivers. It was almost like losing a limb. I wanted to scream the way that man had who had tried to rape me had as I blew off his arm, but I didn’t. I had to try and behave like a man.

It took us the day to negotiate our way into Cartmoor. There were guards and patrols but we could see them and vehicles going in the opposite directions warned us of where the soldiers were. Clearly country men hung together against authority in any circumstances. Soon we were able to join in the game as well, just as long as I stayed low in the cab and never let anyone see my face.

We parked the conveyor in a row of twenty others just like it on the edge of Cartmoor. Martin blackened his face with road dirt and then did the same for me. He was exasperated with me. “You’re supposed to be a man,” he said. “Why don’t you walk like one?”

I tried but I couldn’t. We only went a few steps before he said I was flouncing. Then he said I was mincing, sashaying, tippytoeing and swinging my derriere like a woman in heat. He didn’t dare to take me into a bar or an eatery. Women just didn’t go into such places unless they were comfort women.

“So, get me a dress,” I said, “and a wig.”

Martin laughed. He had a nice laugh. He bent and kissed me. “Why can’t you be a man?” he murmured, kissing my face as I clung to him, just as a bunch of carters came round the corner of the trucks. Ye gods and goddesses, I said to myself, we have *got* to be on better watch than this.

“Wilders,” said one carter, spitting on the earth; I reached inside the pocket of the stuffed overalls and put my hand on the cutter beam again.

“You guys should come over to Henkel’s,” said one as they all walked by us. Martin pretended to be tightening a guy rope at the back of the conveyor. “They got twelve new women there. Oh, can those little dollies dance.”

“I saw a new chorus line up in Lannan,” said one man loudly. “All off-planet girls and twenty of them.”

“You’re joking!” said another.

“On my honor,” protested the loud man. “But the officers got them for afters. I haven’t seen so many nice legs in a row, ever. They’re supposed to be travelling around the baronies as well. But you need a black and green ticket to get a sniff at what they have between their legs.”

That caused a huge, ribald bout of laughter. “Hear that, pondscum?” said one of the last men, pushing Martin as he went by us. I fell into a muddy pool on the track. “Time to get yourself a real woman and leave whoreboys alone.”

“Did you see that one?” I heard one say as they disappeared between more rows of vehicles. “Just a kid and looked very pretty, too. Looked like he was enjoying being kissed.”

Martin grabbed me and hustled me away into the dark of another group of loaders. He had a place he had to go to and he didn't tell me where. I understood. But when he stashed me in a dark alley and told me to stay where I was. I didn't do it. I followed him, trying not to mince, sashay or take dainty steps.

There were too many guards or too many men about the place. I tried to remember my acting classes. You don't try to be a man falling over yourself, if you want to be a drunk, my instructor had said. You act like a man who's not trying to fall over and then people will think you are drunk. I did my best; trying not to weave in the padding I had about me, kind of worked.

"Drunks everywhere in this place," I heard one guardsman say as a little group across the street saw me pass, trying to keep my feet apart, trying to walk like a man. Martin went into a house showing a string of pretty, colored lights. I knew what that meant. I saw guardsmen across the street watching me.

I didn't have to fake being sick. I was sick a lot of the time lately and eating whatever the birds were that Martin spitted for us didn't help my stomach. I vomited into a garbage barrel as a guardsman came to look at me. He laughed and promptly turned on his heel and strode back to his friends, not knowing how close to death he came. I crawled down the alley into the comforting dark as I heard him yelling at someone that he wasn't having some drunk throw up all over his new uniform.

I wouldn't have heard the spitting sound of a stun rifle being fired if I hadn't been leaning against a metallic pipe and it began to vibrate. The whole area seemed to explode with running feet as I crouched back behind a water barrel.

Martin put up a good fight. I saw him firing a stun pistol he must have taken off one of those trying to capture him. There were just too many soldiers, guardsmen and armed civilians. They tried to take him alive. I could see that by the way the shots cut close to him. I think he knew that. He stepped out from the doorway he had tried to flatten himself into and walked forward. Several of the guardsmen from outside the comfort store stepped forward eagerly. He shot them down one by one until, cursing, one of them, refusing to die, emptied a round of darts into him.

A figure I recognized bounded up to the unlucky shooter, said a profane word to him, and cut him in half with his beam. Taggart had arrived on the street.

I inched slowly, numbly, down the alley, just a pile of rags. Martin, so warm and vibrant, so confident he could get out, was just a mound of flesh on a street corner a block from me. I went around a dark buttress into even greater darkness and a hand fell on my shoulder.

"Easy," whispered a voice. "I don't want the scruffs," it was the name given to security and secret police everywhere, "to find me here, either."

"Sorry about your friend," said another voice, further back, behind the one whose hand still rested on me.

"Take his place, Pel," the first voice ordered. "Give him your jacket, boy, in case that scruff made you."

He hauled me up in the dark and started to help me off with the jacket. His hands touched my cutter beam. "Oh no, lad, don't use that," he whispered. "There are scruffs and blackies on the ground like flies all the way up to and through the Inner Ward. Go on, Pel. Get out there while I take this lad for a little talk."

A dark shape went by me and I saw another shamble of rags, covered by my jacket, flop down behind the buttress. A bottle appeared beside him and the smell of cheap cider reached my nostrils making me want to throw up again.

The strong hand pulled me back further into the shadows and I found myself going down some steps and into a windy passage. It was remarkably clear of debris for we made almost no noise in getting deeper into the settlement about Cartmoor. A trapdoor opened and I was thrust into a dark cellar and quickly led through it, past a guarded door where the guards wanted to search me.

"Don't," said the man who had caught me. "The boy has a cutter beam in there. Let's not give him any excuse to use it." He led me on into another room, a bedroom by the look of it.

He spun me around and looked into my face. He had been grim before but suddenly shock replaced that and he pulled the cap from my head and what was left of my hair fell free. "Lady Caroline McDonald!" he said, his eyes bulging in shock.

He patted my sides and gulped as I took out the extra clothing that had made me look so stocky. He edged past me and went to a door that led deeper into the building. "Tell Mimmy I need her," he said to someone.

In just a few moments, a woman came in and I didn't have to look at her twice to realize by the amount of makeup she had on that she was a comfort woman. She was also the oldest woman I had seen in such a low-cut dress.

"We need clothes for this girl," he said as the woman stared at me, frowning. "Yes, Lady Caroline McDonald has fallen into our lap but if she's found here, we're all dead. You'll have to disguise her as one of your girls."

Mimmy nodded and took my hand. I didn't have to say a word. I went further into the house, as the sounds of making out came from every room we passed, down a narrow passage. Outside some doors, men seemed to be waiting in line, chatting as they waited patiently to be admitted to one or other room.

I was pawed by several men and had the urge to unleash my cutter beam on them after one man insolently felt my buttocks and pinched me until I hurt. The waiting men only sniggered as I let out a little squeak and didn't let go Mimmy's hand.

"I'll take her as she is," growled one man.

"She's Brennan's lay," said Mimmy in a soft, furry voice that I recognized as from Pastor, a totally agrarian planet close to Congreve, whose inhabitants and their slow manner of speaking served as the butt of many Congreve jokes.

"Tried to get away," laughed another man, lounging outside another closed door. "Tie her to a bed, Mimmy, and we'll teach her not to be choosy."

"Now now, Albie," Mimmy said. "She's already played out that fantasy twice this evening. Brennan expects a lot more glamor." Sniggers followed us down the hall as she turned into a comfort woman's room, hers I guessed.

She hardly spoke as she got clothes for me. I found myself in a black, plastic bra that looked like leather but wasn't and in a bodice of the same material. I changed my panties, quite unembarrassed as I did it in front of another woman, and put on black ones. Black, fishnet stockings went on my legs followed by a tight, slit skirt that showed off my stockings and my garters. The high heels were higher than any I had worn yet. The earrings were bigger, the necklace was huge and gaudy and the rings and armbands tacky and cheap.

My makeup was overdone, my lips bright, bright red, my eyes slanted and heavy with eyeliner. The black wig that she pinned to my head completely altered what I looked like. She stood me in front of her mirror and I didn't look like me. My breasts seemed much larger with the way she had padded me. I was top heavy. I had a beauty spot near my mouth and Mimmy completed my transformation by adding tattoo-like transfers to my shoulder and on the soft skin that kept being exposed on my thigh as I moved.

"You are Evita," said Mimmy. "She caught something from those blasted Terrans. She's coughing her guts up in the medroom. She might not make it and you'll be her permanently if you need to hide out. You know you might have to comfort more than one man tonight? But Brennan's very nice. He's always gentle. I'll write you up for Corky and Trick as well.

"Does Lady Caroline," she asked calmly, seriously, as if she was a schoolmistress, "know how to give head? It's all the herders want and can afford. It's easy work but there are a lot of them in tonight. The patrols are all over the countryside. They say the rebels killed a bunch of planters."

Her voice trailed off and she looked at the cutter on the table next to my newly painted bright red nails.

"But there aren't any rebels out of Cartmoor tonight," she said slowly. "They're all in here. But I didn't have to tell you about the killings, did I? How many did you get?"

"Just two," I whispered as she picked up the cheap perfume and began spraying me.

"We killed five thousand here before they started bombarding us from space," Mimmy said, teasing the dark, shiny hair about my face. Her accent had disappeared. A pounding began on her door but she made no move to answer it. She got me a very large purse and put my cutter beam in it. "My body count is only eleven. My husband took out a hundred and more in a stupid suicide attack on a personnel carrier. They hauled the bodies off so I don't know if he's alive or dead. So, Evita," she gave me the purse. "As far as I'm concerned, you can kill them all and I wouldn't care."

She went and opened the door and two men in uniform came in.

"Hey, one each," said one of the men as Mimmy pushed me through their grasping, clawing hands and pointed me back down the passageway.

I was kissed by five different men, all using their tongues as I went down the hallway. I was fondled and pinched and my panties were almost torn from me by one gorilla. I ar-

rived at Brennan's room with only one garter still on my leg, the impression of the last man to grab at my panties still making me sting.

"I sent the word out that we have you," said the older man worriedly. "Reinforcements are on the way. The scruffs have started a house to house which means they'll be here soon. After all, where else would you hide a woman but in one of the women's houses?"

"I ought to leave," I said, panicking a little but Brennan wouldn't hear of it.

He took off his jacket and his pants and sat on the bed expectantly. He told me that I was safe and that the rebels would hide me for as long as I wanted.

"Could you please?" he asked suddenly, pointing to his lap and his growing erection as he looked at me.

It had been a delight to do it for Rohan because he got such pleasure from it and returned it to me equally. I hated to have to kneel in front of the old man and to have to do what he wanted, pleasing him as he played with my hair or even my breasts if he could reach them. I felt like telling him that soon he could have his precious Lord Carty in just this way and she would enjoy it more than me. But it would have served no purpose in getting me out of there. I knelt and stroked another man's penis.

A rap on the door stopped me as two uniformed men barged right in to Brennan's room. "Time's up, old man," said one while the other picked up my purse. I looked around wildly. The one with my purse also had a stun pistol pointed at me.

Brennan had turned white with shock. "You can't," he began.

"We can," said the first uniform. "We take Evita and leave you Karen." A vacant-eyed blonde came wagging into the room. She knelt immediately before Brennan and took hold of his member with her mouth. Brennan protested but didn't move from the bed as lipstick changed the color of his erect manhood.

"Let's move," said the second uniform, taking my arm. "This is set at its lowest." He waved his pistol at me. "It would knock you out and we would have to carry you. We'd prefer if you would wiggle your pretty buttocks right down the passage and into the wagon we brought for you."

I wiggled. I couldn't walk any other way. Not while I was in a skirt. A few men taunted the uniforms as they guided me into the cabin of the wagon. One opened the door to the detention cage and pushed me in.

The man in there caught me and did not let me fall. He kissed me and didn't give me a chance to squeak out his name in the excitement I felt at seeing him there in his neatly pressed admiral's uniform.

Rohan Sutcliffe pulled me onto the prisoners' bench and kissed me as thoroughly and masterfully as he ever had before. I could only whimper as I delighted in his kiss.

"You've changed," he whispered as I snuggled beneath him, hugging him to me, wanting to feel him everywhere and know that he was real. He touched my hair and grinned at me. "You make a lovely comfort woman. I'm surprised we got you out of there in one piece. But you know what being a comfort woman means."

"I have to do everything my lord and master wants me to do," I murmured meekly, spreading my legs and putting them around him. I hoped that what he wanted was to make love to me. He kissed the exaggerated mounds on my chest and I pressed into him.

"That has to wait," he said as the wagon swayed over some rough terrain. "It's in the box with you," he said and he indicated a metal box opposite. I clung to him, hardly cooperating, demanding his touches and kisses as he had me lie in it, trying to explain how the oxygen bottles worked.

"You may get turned over and be travelling head down but you'll have to put up with it," he said. "McDonald thinks I am rescuing my sister tonight, which I am, but it makes the perfect cover for getting you out as well."

"Your sister?" I asked, holding onto him as he tucked my legs into the case. He was unable to resist stroking my legs as my skirt parted and showed him what he had been missing.

"Lady Sheila Sutcliffe," he said as he shut me in. "You knew her as Mimmy, I think. She's in the front cab." He was knocking on the connecting door even as he closed the lid on me.

XIV. REFORMED

I was there so long that I thought they had forgotten about me. I was certain that my air was going to run out when suddenly a scraping on the outer case occurred and brightness flooded my little prison.

"A bathroom," I squeaked and a woman laughed at me.

I knew that voice. "Director Colach," I gasped.

"Minister Colach," she said, though I couldn't see her very well. "So this is what has become of you, Investigator Smit. I don't think your present costume would have captivated an admiral of the Nebula Kingdom's sovereign navy. Let him, her, use my wash-room," she said to someone else, "and don't let her have any of the Armandy lifewaters. If she is Smit, she prefers the green Metaxa."

I was happy. She'd used the right codes. She must be Lady Myra Colach. I didn't know the women who helped me in the bathroom. I not only got to use the facilities but I was showered and cleaned up. The wig disappeared and my own hair received the attention of a proper hairdresser who cut and shaped it while another girl worked on my face.

I was clothed in new, soft white lingerie and long stockings. The bra fitted me perfectly as did the light-colored, mostly white, silk dress. I had pearl earrings, a pearl necklace, even pearls on my high heels. I was unused to the short skirts so prevalent in the Kingdom; one of Colach's girls reminded me how to sit so that I appeared ladylike.

"Lady Caroline McDonald," she announced me and ushered me into the office of my employer.

Lady Myra looked up from her papers and then put them down. She didn't play games with me this time.

“Beautiful,” she said, her voice touched in wonder.

I sat and smoothed my dress under me, crossing my legs as one of the girls had said was acceptable.

“What a woman you make,” she said. “I can understand Admiral Sutcliffe’s defection now.”

“His defection?” I asked stupidly.

Lady Myra nodded. “You won’t know this but he contacted me through Admiral George,” she said. “He let me know how I had been misled about John McDonald. I hear that he even had a replacement for me at the ready.”

“You know it all?” I asked.

She shook her head and frowned. “I gave you four things to find out, didn’t I? I’m sorry. I have to call you Caroline. I just can’t see anything of Investigator Willen Smit about you at all. Do you recall those four aims, Caroline?”

I nodded. It felt odd not to have the mass of hair down my back, but my earrings seemed livelier as they danced against my neck, lovely reminders that I was still beautiful even by Kingdom standards. I looked down demurely at my soft, rounded breasts and shapely legs. I would have hated it if she had called me Willen or Smit or Mister Investigator, as she sometimes did.

“Have you found the source of assassins?” Lady Myra asked me, still frowning. “Did you locate the machines being used to replicate our nanotech industry? Have you located the scientists who are doing this work? Can you name for me the traitors in our security who sold them this technology?”

“I think so,” I said and told her everything I knew, from the medtech who had taken Marissa’s place to the leaks in Vanyon’s office.

“Vanyon and Marissa Devarie are gone,” said Lady Myra flatly. “And how did they get Willen Smit’s codes out of you, Lady Caroline.? Was it pillow talk on your side?”

“I never broke operational security,” I said, hating the way my breasts rose when I got angry and breathed a little faster.

“Which scientist did the breakthrough work and made you pregnant?” she asked, looking at me intently.

“I am pregnant?” I gasped, my hands on my lap instinctly touching my abdomen.

“So we are told,” said Lady Myra with an ironic smile. “The Lord Protector wants you to return at once to Shannondale so that you can have your baby, the McDonald heir, in the proper place and with the proper women attendants. He wants to make that a clause in the treaty we are negotiating now.”

“They’ve closed the Lannan facility,” I began.

“Heavens no,” she said. “They need it for the future and we will fund its future development.”

I could tell by her cynical smile what was going to happen. “You’ll do to Congreve what Carmichael did to the Kingdom,” I said.

“Poetic justice,” she said. “The Lord Protector claims that he had no idea what Lord John McDonald was doing at Lannan. Would you agree?”

“I think so,” I said. “It’s bizarre to think of part of that huge secret facility being used to change men into women.”

“They’re not going to stop,” Lady Myra snapped, “and you should be glad they aren’t. You might guess what they will do to the latest batch of prisoners they intend to process, and with the new nannies they developed for you.”

“They can’t,” I protested. “I thought you were going to destroy it all.”

“I never said that,” said Lady Myra. “Besides, think about it. Think about all the women they are going to produce who used to be men. The Lord Protector thinks that his sheltered little society is going to last but it won’t stand up very long as his own soldiers start to marry women who were better soldiers than they were.

“Lord Carty may appear to be a busty, bubble-headed blonde whose only skill is to take down his panties on the public stage. But make him a mother, with children to protect and his organizational skills will surface again. Mark my words. The next Carmichael rebellion will be led by its women and they will be successful and they will shape a new society out here.”

Lady Myra shuffled the papers in front of her. “So, darling Caroline, please go and find Rohan Sutcliffe and let him enjoy you for every second he can. I still have to complete all the answers to the questions I put in the first place. I need Investigator Willen Smit and his investigatory talents and I have a lot of work to do here to get you back to what you were.

“It won’t take as long back to the Kingdom on this vessel. You’ll find out soon that it is *Titan’s Hammer*, Admiral George’s flagship, that you are on, and the guest facilities are quite sumptuous. As I said, Admiral Sutcliffe has been like a dog in heat ever since he got here from downbelow. Go and scratch that itch, will you?”

I scratched Rohan’s itch for several days. He loved me in the revealing dresses women wore in the Kingdom; after feeling very awkward in them at the start, I soon got to love them and the looks they produced from the men on the ship. I was going to miss that when I returned to my old drab self, I knew, and Rohan tried to persuade me to stay on Carmichael and be his wife.

The Lord Protector had already granted him the barony of Lannan, so that he was Lord Rohan Sutcliffe now. He was sifting through the records there to find his brother-in-law, Lord Carty, whom his sister wanted back as her husband.

“He might like being a woman,” I said and he snorted.

“If it’s so wonderful,” he said, “why don’t you stay here with me and be Lady Sutcliffe? You love me making love to you, don’t you? Are you dreaming of being a man and doing it as we do with another woman? I can’t believe that. I’ve never had a woman who has orgasms like you do, but I’ve heard it is spreading. The dancers in Henkel’s revues are already notorious throughout the Moor baronies.”

It was different for them. They lived in a different society. I had to go back. I always did when my contract was up.

It was terrible to part from him. I sobbed when the techs parted us and took me down to my medshell. When I awoke, all of this adventure of being a woman would be behind me. I couldn't have married another man. I *couldn't*. But I had married John McDonald, not that I wanted to.

I was still plagued by the story of being pregnant. Colach had snorted that it was impossible when Rohan asked for me to be examined. I couldn't be a mother, not a man like me. I lay back in the casket-like shell after they injected me. The medtech had moved my hands over my breasts. Why were they so aroused, I wondered. I was determined that I would not think of them. I was not going to miss them.

XV. REAWAKENED

I had the most terrible dreams this time while being re-sorted in the medshell. I actually thought I had been awakened more than once but the medtechs who awakened me for what I thought was the second time told me I'd had a 'nano-nightmare' and said it was very common.

I was asked several times what I had dreamed about and one psyche-nurse got pretty angry with me when I told her I was too embarrassed to relate my nightmare. I just wanted to get it out of my head and, since she couldn't help me do that, I would just have to endure it. But I could think of nothing else for the first weeks of my revival as Willen Smit.

I didn't want to tell them that I had dreamed of another awakening. Awakening was an agony and in my nightmare, it was no different to the real thing. I could hear the soothing voice of the female medtech as she squirted cool water on my lips. I was instantly seized by roiling pains in my abdomen. My hands were strapped to the sides of the medshell. I didn't know why at first. I tried to protest but waves of pain went through me.

"Don't push," said a female voice in my nightmare and a cool hand with long fingernails began to massage my back. I remember that as clearly as if it had really happened.

Then the pains came again. That was why they put us under so deeply for nanotech transformations. No one was strong enough to bear the pain. I was dreaming that I was awake and I dreamed of the worst pains a man like me would have had to endure.

"Now you can push," said a voice and I let out a harsh scream as I realized what I was doing.

"No!" I screamed hoarsely. "No! It's not possible."

"What is he saying?" asked someone else.

"He doesn't want to be a mother," said another as the pains hit me again.

"He doesn't have any choice," said another voice grimly. "We don't kill babies before they're born out here. And here she comes."

I screamed again and I wasn't alone. A baby's cry was resounding with my own.

Within moments, a little bundle was placed beside me. "Caroline," said a voice. "Can you hear us? Do you understand? You are a mother now. You have a baby girl. You can let

the director in now, Esther. We've got the afterbirth and the baby is fine. Mother is doing well. Do we have to give her these restorative nannies?"

"Of course we do," said Lady Colach's voice. How could she have been there? She never came with me to the lab. She said it made her squeamish. "He has to finish the job he set out to do. I need to find all the traitors who stole our nanotech secrets. I have got to have Vanyon back."

"I don't think she, he, woke up, despite the screaming," someone said.

"Good," said Colach. "Black him out again and let the nannies get on with their work. If you can hear me, Willen Smit, your nanotech transformation is starting again. This was all just a nannie nightmare, being a mother and giving birth. Next time you awake, I promise you, you will be in your own body."

That was the funny part. The voices were so clear. When I finally did break down and tell one of Royal's shrinks how real it had all been, he laughed at me. "That's what nano-nightmares are like," he told me. "They are so precise and so impossible. It's good that you got it out at last. We can look at your medical records and you will see that there was blip once when the Carmichael nannies were flushed from you. Then the reversion project had to begin again using nannies developed at Royal.

"That's what took so long. You were never awakened. I can reassure you on that. But you must be used to losing half a year at a time by now, mustn't you? If it hadn't been for that interesting intervention on Carmichael, you could have been finished in six months. Backwater barbarians!"

I had seen the facilities at Lannan. No barbarian had developed that place. I couldn't have taken it out with the charges I normally carried in my special "investigator's working kit." I had timing devices and bombs and flamers. But I didn't have a kit on Carmichael. I couldn't have done it anyway.

I tried other dreams of Carmichael. I tried to dream of being Lady Caroline. I tried to dream of Rohan, but that only made me embarrassed. A man like me dreaming of another man. But was it worse to constantly dream of having been a mother?

The one thing I could never tell the psyche, however, the one thing I had to keep deep inside me and never let out or he would have known that I was really addled, was that at times, I wished, oh how I wished, that I was still Lady Caroline and that it had all been true.

****End of the first episode****