

BLACKSTAR'S LADY

By Katrina Susan Henderson



ILLUSTRATED BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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BLACKSTAR'S LADY

By Katrina Susan Henderson

1. Hired Aboard the *S. S. Eglad*

That day was a hot one on the planet Kaistarus when I applied for the position of Assistant Purser on the *S. S. Eglad*. I was in the port of Ameth in a long line with a lot of other hopefuls who wanted a job to survive the depression that followed the Damocles Uprisings, even if it meant shipping out into the hazards of deep space. The line moved slowly. Positions on the *Eglad* were scant, but it was the first freighter in port since the Damocles Uprisings had occurred here in my home sector. After about an hour of waiting in line, at last it became my turn.

“Position wanted?” asked a man with the bars of the first mate.

“Assistant Purser,” I replied.

“Right. Name?” he questioned.

“Evan Vale,” I answered as curtly as he had asked.

“Your papers, please!” he demanded.

“Aye, sir,” I said as I removed a minidata disk from my wristcomp.

He took it from me and inserted it into a terminal in front of him. He scanned it for a few minutes and then looked up at me.

“Seems you don't have much experience on starships,” he stated blandly.

“Aye, sir. My experience has mostly been with surface pleasure craft and merchant supply. I last served on the Ameth Cruise Ship *Persephone* in the position of Assistant Purser. I felt that I could now transfer my talent to space, specifically, to interstellar ships since the Uprising is over,” I replied steadily.

He broke a slight grin and asked, “Why not apply for Chief Purser?”

“I've never been in space outside this star system and will have some new ropes to learn. I'll make less mistakes and learn more as the Assistant Purser, besides, you didn't advertise for a Chief Purser.”

He gave out a good natured laugh and replied, “Well said. I'll do what I can for you. Come back after lunch and I'll see if I can get a word with the Captain. By the way, the handle's Gordon, Gordon Scott.”

“Thank you, Mr. Scott. I'll be back after lunch and I hope to be able to serve with you,” I said with relief.

“Aye, me too, Mr. Vale. Now be off with you. Next applicant, if you please.” He motioned me along.

I walked away a bit lighter on my feet. At least I hadn't been turned down outright like the other jobs I had applied for. It was a long wait until after lunch. I amused myself by checking out the rest of the spaceport. Everywhere, robots and personnel scurried to get the port ready for ships that would soon be heading back into this sector. While the *Egland* may not be the last ship to stop here, it was the only ship I had a chance for while I still had part of my bankroll left to pay for the things I'd need aboard.

The reason for my recent hardship was the Damocles Uprisings and the depression that followed it.

When the war came I was classified as unfit for the service because I had failed the Uniform Physical Combat Screening Test which separated the men and women suited for such horrors from the 'children', and I found myself serving on planet bound supply and cruise ships advancing from auto-scuttery work in their galleys to Purser. So, I was no war hero.

When the depression had hit, it had hit not only the sector, but also me, with a devastating blow. When the Uprisings had finally come to an end, my job had deserted me for a returning veteran and my father and mother were dead. Despite the fact that the Commonwealth had finally restored order the depression had destroyed most of my family's money as well as my own investments. All I had left was the few meager credits that inhabited my savings account.

I waited the hours out, trying to stay away from the food vendors that tempted me to spend my last few credits. With any luck, I would soon join the ranks of the employed again. I quickly checked my cheap chronometer and saw that it was nearly after the lunch hour. I quit my contemplation of my predicament and headed back for the interview area. Once I got there, I saw not only Mr. Scott, but an older gentleman with a gray beard and mustache dressed in the uniform of a merchant captain.

“Ah, here we are, Captain. Sir, may I introduce, Mr. Vale, who has applied for the position of Assistant Purser,” stated Mr. Scott formally.

“A good day to you, Mr. Vale.” The Captain offered his hand.

“Aye, sir. I hope to be able to serve with you, if I'm not being to presumptuous,” I replied shaking his hand smartly.

“Not at all, Mr. Vale. I appreciate a person who takes a bit of initiative. As it so happens, I've reviewed your record and found it, and yourself, acceptable. You will report to Chief Purser Ward on the *Egland* at 1600 hours. Ward will see to your comfort and briefing. Mr. Scott will give you a list of things you'll need to bring.”

“Aye, sir. And, thank you, sir, for this opportunity.”

“Good. Carry on, Mr. Scott,” he replied sauntering off.

“That, by the way, Mr. Vale, that was our skipper, Captain John Baxter. I've sailed with him for five years now and he's a fine a skipper as anyone could hope for. You work hard and with diligence and he'll make it worth your while. All of us that have

shipped with him for more than three years are now part owners in this here company and if you work out, the skipper will cut you in for a piece of the pie,” he said taking a piece of paper out of his comppad.

“Sounds good to me, Mr. Scott. Is that the list of the supplies I need to take aboard?” I asked.

“Aye, that it is, Mr. Vale. Here you go. Get the goods and meet us here a bit before 1600 hours. Ward will be wanting to meet you then,” he replied handing me the list.

I took the list from him, snapped smartly to attention and said, “Aye, sir. Will there be anything else?”

“No, Mr. Vale, and drop that military shit. We're all freeloiving entrepreneurs on the old *Egland*. Now, git,” he answered giving me a sloppy salute.

“Aye, sir,” I replied with a grin as I hurried off.

It took me till nearly 1600 to get all the goods Mr. Scott had on the list. When all was said and done, I had only a few credits left and not enough for the extra clothing suggested on the list. I decided that I would just have to do with the two sets I already had, even though, both were beginning to look a bit worn. With the last few credits, I splurged and bought myself my last meal ashore. It wasn't very good, but since I had gone without since dinner last night, it tasted just fine. After I finished, I went back to the docking pit where the *S. S. Egland* was ported.

The *Egland*, as I mentioned before was a freighter, an old one at that. She sat in her pit. A pitted tower of dull metal with her name emblazoned on her in partially rubbed off red letters. Her registry, which could barely be made out, identified her as an independent merchant man and her home port as Alibulus which was in the Viarta Sector. Well, she may be old and decrepit, but she was home now.

I hoisted the strap of my bag onto my shoulder and walked around the ship to the main gangway. As I came around to it, I noticed someone standing there waiting for me. As I got closer, I saw that it was a gray haired lady of about the same age as the captain. She eyed me warily as I approached and seemed to be sizing me up. I admit that I did not present the best image I could have. My clothes were obviously worn and the bag caused me to struggle a bit due to its weight. Now, as I have said, I'm not the most athletic person in the galaxy, actually, I was quite weak when it came to moving things around. But, I had not been hired as a labor droid, and I was strong enough to push the right buttons, so to speak.

As I got closer, I noticed that she was wearing the uniform of the Chief Purser, and as I came to the bottom of the gangway, I stopped and came to attention saying, “Permission to come aboard?”

“Permission granted. Here, let me help you with that, little man,” she said with a roar of friendly laughter reaching for the strapped bag, “That bag is bigger than you are.”

“Uh, thanks,” I replied as she easily took the bag from me leaving me only my duffel bag.

“No problem. Follow me and we'll get you settled in,” she answered leading me into the interior of the *Egland*.

It took us about ten minutes to get to the Purser's cabin which was located in the center most part of the ship around the main spinal where the crew quarters were located. The *Egland* was typical of her design with the cargo holds on the outside cylinder and the crew sections located in the inner cylinder. Occupying the spinal, itself, was the ship's main drive, the computer, and occupying the very top of the spinal, the ship's bridge and navigation array.

She opened the door and beckoned me inside the Purser's cabin. The cabin was typical of those found on most ships, consisting of a small bathroom, a small living section complete with two desks, a couple of chairs, two bunks with a small wardrobe next to them, and a set of two drawers underneath the bunks. She set my bag down on one of the bunks.

“Well, here we are. Set down and make yourself at home,” she said sitting down on the bunk opposite the one she had set my bag down on.

“Thanks,” I replied sitting down opposite her.

“Allow me to introduce myself, I'm Angelica Ward, the Chief Purser. You must be my new assistant,” she began with a thin lipped smile.

“Yes, ma'am. I'm Evan Vale and I hope I work out well,” I replied with a grin.

“I'm sure you will, Evan.”

“What's the ship routine?”

“Well ship routine requires us to prepare meals for the crew in the ship's galley for three shifts. One meal at 0600, one at 1500 and one at 2200. In addition to cooking the meals, we serve them and do the dishes. We do the laundry and ship's cleaning. Once a week, we conduct a detailed inventory of the supplies we have. And we are in charge of entertainment procurement.

“Since you are a salaried employee, you get paid on the first of the month. Money doesn't do you much good until we hit port so it is just banked with the Galactic Credit Banking System until we reach port. You will be issued a card after your first week here,” she explained.

“That's sounds pretty standard to me. It is the same on surface cruise ships, only more so. So, I guess I'd better get settled in. Where do I bunk?”

“Why right where you are, dear,” she replied with a smirk.

I looked shocked, but had to ask, “And where will you bunk?”

“Why right here, hon,” she answered patting the bunk she was sitting on.

“But. . .,” I began.

“No buts about it. You've been assigned the position of Assistant Purser and that's the bunk of the Assistant Purser. Don't worry, I don't bite. Besides, me and the captain have an understanding and frankly, there's no room in it for you. I'm sure we'll get along fine. Just think of me as your mother and we'll get along just fine.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Good. Now put your things away and get some rest. We have work to do since we are leaving in the morning and the captain wishes to have a get together this evening for all our new help. I've got a couple of things to check up on, so I'll leave you to get settled,” she said, adding with a little chuckle, “Feel free to borrow anything of mine you may need. We girls need to share everything, but the crew.”

I was in a state of frank shock as she got up and left the room. I had never lived in the same house with a woman, other than my mother, let alone sharing a room with one. I sat there for a few minutes and then after a bit of soul searching decided that the best thing to do was unpack. I opened my packs and sorted everything out on the bed. It sure didn't amount to much. It was a change of clothes, nearly worn to thread bareness, a couple of pictures of the family, a portable entertainment center with discs, a ship's toiletry kit, a personal hygiene kit, a portapad and pen, and last of all, the item that took most of my money, my own set of emergency vacuum gear. I had flinched over the price for that set of emergency vacuum gear, but it was a necessity. Without it, I could die in an emergency. The whole suit fitted easily into a waist belt and would envelope you in a stout plastic membrane that would protect you for eight hours in space.

I opened up the two drawers under the bed. The first one I opened was filled with feminine undergarments. I blushed a little at first looking at them in fascination. They were soft to the touch and made of fine delicate cloth. I pulled my hand away and shut the drawer. I would just have to ask Angelica to put her dainties somewhere else when I got enough money to restock my depleted wardrobe. I opened the other drawer and finding it empty, put all of my things within.

After I had my few belongings set aside, I placed my change of clothes on the bed and went to take a shower in the bathroom. I took my towel with me and a thin but serviceable cloth robe that I have had for years. I locked the bathroom door behind me and looked about the bathroom.

The bathroom was small and consisted of a sonic shower, a toilet and a small wash basin. Littering the top of the wash basin, totally covering it in fact, were a large selection of Angelica's beauty aides including her complete make-up kit. My mother had never had one of those and she never wanted one. She maintained that a woman didn't need make-up to look beautiful. I had, of course, agreed with her, but I still thought women who used make-up looked better with it than without.

I took off my dirty clothes and sat them on the toilet set with my robe and towel. I climbed into the sonic shower and activated it. It was computerized, one of the latest models I had ever seen. It was obviously not ship standard and I realized that Angelica must have bought it with her own money. It had a fantastic equipment assembly and had every function that I could have described. As the shower started to soothe me, I noticed that it had a voice activated computer.

“Hello, computer,” I said dubiously.

“Good day, mistress. I sense you are in urgent need of restoration. Should I execute the prearranged program?” answered the computer promptly in a woman's voice.

“Yeah, sure,” I replied with a grin.

It was obvious to me that the computer in the shower had been preprogrammed to respond to Angelica and it didn't have any sensors to tell it that I was not. Suddenly the shower seemed to sting a little more and I noticed that the sonic shower head began to change shape and rake over my body. It seemed to be following a prearranged program of targeting parts of my body.

“Stop it,” I said as the stinging became painful as it sought out my labia majora and settled for the head of my penis!.

“Stop what, mistress?” the computer sang back sweetly.

“Stop the shower,” I replied as the stinging began to impact on my face.

“I'm sorry, mistress. The program you have initiated is not capable of being aborted as per the prearranged instructions. The program is scheduled to terminate in two point three seconds.”

I endured the final few seconds and then the shower switched back to it's normal soothing function and the computer said, “Normal function resumed. Do you require defoliation?”

“Will it hurt?” I asked dubiously.

“No, mistress. Shall I proceed?”

“Very well,” I answered with a sigh.

“Acknowledged, mistress. Defoliation sequence engaged. Do you wish for a hygiene cleansing.”

“No thanks.”

If the shower had seemed pleasant before, it was doubly so now as it began to knead and massage my body. It was wonderful how the pain I had experienced before was rapidly fading away. I glanced down at my body.

“Oh my God!” I cried out loud for the hair on my body had fallen away and was riding the sonic waves out the sonic shower disposal chute .

I was completely hairless from my chest down to my feet, except for a tuft of hair that had been left on my privates. My arms and hands too showed a complete lack of hair and were smooth and supple to the touch, just like a woman's!

I stood there in shock as the sonic shower sprayed a fine lotion over my bare skin until my now soft skin glistened with a faint floral scent before the shower terminated it's functions. I slowly got out of the shower and went to look in the mirror above the small wash basin. I groaned aloud as I noticed that my facial hair was also missing. My goatee was gone as were my long sideburns while my eyebrows had been shaped into a narrow arch over each eye. Of the 5 o'clock shadow that normally occupied the shaved areas of my face, there was no sign that hair had ever grown there.

Suddenly, I heard a knock at the door and Angelica's voice saying, “Are you about done, hon? Time's a wasting and we don't got all day to be about our work!”

"Sure, Angelica. Just a minute," I replied hurriedly donning my robe and pushing my collar length bushy hair back noting that it was now cleaned, conditioned, and wavy with full body curls as if it had been styled in a salon!

Nervously I realized that the computer had given me the complete beauty bath that it would provide Angelica.

Thank God I had sense enough to refuse her hygiene routine or I might have found a tampon shoved up my penis, or worse!

I hung my towel up on the provided hook and noticed that my dirty clothes were gone. In puzzlement, I opened the door and exited the bathroom knowing that there was no place to hide my shamefully feminine appearance!.

"Well, you certainly look refreshed," said Angelica sweetly as I went to my bunk for my clothes. "My, don't we smell nice."

"Uh, thanks. What the. . .!" I exclaimed as I found my clothes gone from the bed.

"Whatever is the matter, hon?" asked Angelica with a grin on her face.

"Where are my clothes?"

"They were horrible, hon. Threadbare and worn, so I put them and your dirty pair in the recycler," she replied in puzzlement.

I sat down in shock on the bed. My clothes were gone! *What was I going to do now.* I let out a slight groan and put my head in my hands.

"Whatever is wrong with you, hon?" Angelica questioned, sitting down next to me and putting her arm around my shoulders.

"Those were the only clothes I have," I groaned miserably.

"Oh! I see. Don't worry. I have it all figured out."

"You do?" I asked in amazement.

"Certainly. You can wear the old Assistant Purser's uniforms until we get to the next port and you can buy yourself some."

"Great, Angelica. That would do I guess," I replied as she got up and went to the wardrobe.

She rummaged in it for a few moments and came out with a uniform that looked like hers. As she brought it over, I found myself blushing. It was too much like hers. It had the standard ship's blouse on top, but in place of pants, it had a long straight skirt!

"I can't wear that!"

"Why not. You're the new Assistant Purser and this is the Assistant Purser's uniform," she stated matter of factly.

"But, it's a woman's uniform," I blurted out.

"So, it is, but it's the only thing you've got now that your other clothes are gone," she replied placing it on the bed.

“But, I'll look silly in that, that. . .,” I stammered, wondering if she was taunting me.

“No, you won't. I'll help you. Now come with me.” She seized my left hand with a surprisingly strong grip.

I was in a state of shock and let her lead me into the bathroom. On the way, she grabbed a chair from one of the desks and placed it in front of the wash basin.

“Here, sit,” she ordered.

I sat down in the chair and she got out her make-up kit. She opened it on the basin and then turned to me.

“I see you used the restoration setting on the shower,” she stated bluntly with a knowing giggle.

“Yes, I guess I did,” I replied with growing embarrassment as she began to use a beauty-spray from her kit to apply something to my face.

“Don't fidget, hon. I'm just putting on some foundation. I never used that setting myself. It came special on this model, but I kind of like shaving my hair off myself, so I always reply no when the computer asks me about the restoration sequence. I was going to get it deleted at our last stop, but Kaistarus had no one who could reprogram it.”

“Oh, so it was just shaving hair,” I sighed in relief.

“Nope. Your hair is gone for good if you didn't modify the program.”

“What?!” I exclaimed leaning back from her.

“Oh, I see you didn't. The program was specially designed to eliminate all hair on a woman except for a triangle tuft of hair in her middle, femininely curved eyebrows and the hair on top of her head. As a matter of fact, it was designed to curl the eyebrows and stimulate hair growth on the scalp and I see that your long lashes are already nicely curled. Once I finish with you, you'll fit right in,” she replied reaching again into her make-up kit.

I sat there in stunned disbelief as she continued to work on me. Next she applied with the beauty spray brush some powder and some soft pink blush. Then she applied eye shadow and mascara. Lastly, she had me purse my lips while she applied a soft pink lipstick to them. She then got out her hair styling kit and soon gave me a new hair do. When at last she stepped away I saw myself in the mirror. I was shocked to see a pretty girl staring right back!

“Not bad. You look a lot like my niece, Cassandra. Well, come on, hon. Let's get you dressed.”

I mutely followed her back into the main part of the cabin. She stopped and reached for the drawer full of the feminine undergarments. I gasped as she fished out a pair of lacy white panty briefs, a flowered lace trimmed bra and a woman's flesh colored self adhering hygiene sanitary pad.

“Here you go, hon,” she said handing them to me.

“But, but. . .,” I stammered.

“Put them on, now,” she ordered irritably.

I nodded mutely and turned from her. I opened up the front of my robe and felt the cold air of the room against my hairless naked body. It was damn cold in there!

As I stood there, she grabbed my manhood saying, “Don't panic, hon. I'm just fixing you up for your monthly.”

As I watched in shivering fear mixed with renewed humiliation she gently peeled a coat of plastic from the sanitary pad's urethra outlet inserting it into my meatus before she carefully pushed my genitals up into my body cavity and then placed the surgical pad over them. She then pressed the small labia majora pad in place making my front as smooth and as natural looking as a girl's during her period.

Unlike the old fashioned napkin or tampon style menstrual pad this device was designed to prevent any urinary infections, or allow any messy leakage of the blood flow from the woman's vagina. During her period she had no messy pads or such to fuss with when she used the toilet. When her period was over the pad changed color and could be easily removed.

“That looks good, hon. Now you can put on the rest of your clothes yourself,” she said with a satisfied look on her face. “Just remember, if you want to pee, get to a toilet as soon as possible. We girls can't clamp off any hose, sweet thing.”

I dubiously took the white pair of shape fitting panty briefs and stepped into them and pulled them up, surprised to see that the high waisted panty was designed to shape the waist while it flattened the tummy and lifted my derriere much like a under-wired bra might lift a woman's breasts!. They felt fantastic against my hairless skin feeling silky and utterly soft. All in all, they felt more comfortable than my old underwear. Next, I took off the robe and fumbled with the bra.

Angelica laughed and helped me with it.

“There now. You lean forward slightly so that your breasts will hang in the cups and pull the straps up your arms to just below the shoulder with the breasts just setting in the cups. Oh, dear. You don't have much so we'll just have to stuff you when we're done. Now take one end in one hand and one in the other and reach back. Now just stick the self adhesive strips together and then pull the straps up over your shoulders. Now was that so bad?”

I had followed her instructions as she had spoken them and I was now wearing the bra with its white lace flowers laying on my chest . Angelica then reached into the drawer again and pulled out a pair of nylons and stuck them into the bra cups to form perfect looking breasts.

“That should give a gal a little more development when she wears a gown so that her boy friend can drool with passion. Your shaping up fine, hon.

“All you need to do is put on the uniform and pair of thigh highs with deck shoes and you'll be set for work,” she noted getting out a pair of nylons and handing them to me.

I laughed dubiously, but after a bit of trial and error, I got the sheer silky hose rolled up to my thighs where they clung like a second skin. I stepped into the skirt and

pulled it up to where Angelica said it should go. Next I put on the blouse and noticed that the uniform fitted easily and it flattered the cup of my false breasts.

Anglica went to the wardrobe and brought back a pair of white deck pumps with two inch platform heels that went along with the uniform.

I put them on and stood shakily on my feet.

“Very good, now walk around a bit.”

I took a few hesitating steps and nearly fell down between the restriction of the skirt and the heels on the pumps.

Angelica laughed at me and then showed me how to walk with mincing steps. It did make it a lot easier to walk but it tended to let my uplifted ass sway back and forth, as I minced about the room.

Anglica took a ships tote bag out of the wardrobe while I put on my emergency vacuum suit belt. She handed me the ships tote bag and said, “Come on, hon. It's time for work.”

She lead me out of the cabin and out into the ship. My first day at work on the *S. S. Eglan*d had begun.

And already I had been transformed from being a man to looking like a pretty woman!

2. Cassandra, the Assistant Purser

For the first hour and a half we met no one as we worked. We first had to inventory existing supplies and plan the meal for the Captain and crew.

All during our preparation of the meal, Angelica kept up a lively conversation including suggestions on feminine behavior along with some questions about my past and then she supplied information about herself.

She had left home at an early age and had drifted from ship to ship ever since. She had recently landed the post of Chief Purser on the *Overion* which had been her last ship prior to her recent hiring on the *Eglan*d. Her previous employment had been terminated when she had a falling out with the Chief Engineer who wanted to have sex with her and she didn't want it with him. All in all she was a tough old gal and she now had her sights set on Captain Baxter.

When I asked her why, she just laughed and replied that she wasn't getting any younger.

I just laughed along with her and bent to my tasks.

It felt strange to me that after wearing the clothes for a couple of hours, that I had completely forgotten about them as I had my painted up face.

That all changed, however, when Mr. Scott entered the galley. He did a double take at the door and then came over to us. I felt the color rise to my cheeks as he saw me standing there, in shock, in my white pumps, made up face and cute little Assistant Pursuer's uniform.

“Good day, Ward. Where's Mr. Vale?” he asked in a steady voice.

"Oh, he couldn't make it, Mr. Scott. He had an emergency he had to attend to. Something dealing with the police, I think," she replied quickly. "So I got a replacement for him."

"Oh, I see. And who is this ravishing girl who is helping you?" he questioned looking me straight in the face.

"Well, Mr. Scott. Permit me to introduce you to my niece, Cassandra Berrie. Cassandra, this is Mr. Gordon Scott, the first officer of the *Egland*."

"Hello, Miss Berrie," he said flashing me a grin.

"Uh, hello, Mr. Scott," I replied extending my hand.

He took it, pressed it to his lips. "Haven't we met somewhere before?"

I was in a state of panic, pulled my hand back and stammered, "I don't think so, Mr. Scott."

"Excellent," he replied turning back to Angelica. "She has spirit. She'll do just fine here. Well, I've got to nip off and tell the Captain of the change in the roster. I think he will be pleased to find that we have a lovely girl on board rather than a man on the run from the police. See you at dinner, Miss Berrie, Miss Ward,"

With that he went out the door whistling a tune that I was unfamiliar with. I looked down at my hand where he had kissed it like it was something from the other side of the galaxy. Where he had kissed it, it was still warm and seemed to have burned itself into my skin. I looked up in confused consternation over my strange unmasculine emotions when I heard Angelica giggling.

"What?" I demanded crossly.

"Nothing, dear. Well, if you passed Mr. Scott's test, you'll dazzle them all."

"Why did you tell him that I was named Cassandra?" I questioned as I resumed my work.

"Well, we can't have you running around as a boy, can we. After all, all you've got is women's clothes now."

"But, I can't pass as a woman," I blurted out quickly.

"Of course, you can. You just did and with flying colors I might add. With me here to help you, you'll pass for as long as you're with us. Besides, most of the men on this tub only know the whores in the ports they visit and for only one night at that. They wouldn't know a real woman if she turned around and bit them.

"From what I can see, if the most experienced one here can't tell you from a real woman, than you are secure here for as long as you want to work on the *Egland*, and none have had a closer intimate relationship with a woman than Mr. Scott.

"All you have to do, if you don't want to be Cassandra after this voyage is over is to leave the ship at our next port of call and buy yourself some male clothes and return to your life, such as it is. Until then, though, you're my niece, Cassandra Berrie. Any questions, Assistant Purser Berrie?"

"Just one. What happened to Mr. Scott's relationship?"

“Why, Cassandra! That’s his business, but she was killed last year while they were at an art exhibition on Herenius V. Now, don't you go repeating what I just said. Especially in hearing range of Mr. Scott. Now, am I going to get any argument about your being my niece for the rest of this voyage?”

I knew I was beat."No, ma'am."

That seemed to suit her fine and she turned back to her work humming a tune.

I bent again to the food and soon we had dinner prepared. Together we put a table cloth on the captain's table and set out the dinnerware and glasses. We set the food on the table and filled the glasses.

As we were finishing up, the crew walked in with Mr. Scott. Most of them where the typical spacemen you see at any port. Generally ill kept but in a good humor from just coming back from shore leave.

Of the crew, the only one who looked positively mean was the Chief Engineer. He was a muscle bound hefty man of about forty and had a long jagged scar down the left side of his face.

“What's this?Two bitches now?” he growled out.

“Now, Rosco. Don't go on like that. These ladies have fixed us a fine meal. Why don't you try to be civil, engineer?” Gordon said easily.

“That bitch, Ward, is enough for me. I don't want an Assistant Bitch to contend with as well,” he barked out giving us a leering glance.

“Too bad, Rosco. Just put up with it and that's an order.” Gordon maneuvered himself between us and the Chief Engineer.

With that, Rosco just snorted and took his prearranged seat at the table.

Seeing that a fight was not immediately in the offing, the rest of the men took their seats.

Mr. Scott came over and held our chairs for us to sit at the table before he assumed his seat. It was odd having a man hold the chair for me as I seated myself, odd but somehow pleasant.

After a couple of moments, the captain walked in.

“Captain on deck!” exclaimed Gordon rising to his feet.

The other men followed suit and I would have too if Angelica hadn't caught my arm and gave me a negative shake of the head.

“At ease, gentlemen and ladies. Please me seated,” replied Captain Baxter taking his seat.

Captain Baxter must have had his best dress uniform on. It's medals were polished and the lapels were well pressed and stuck out rigidly like a pair of jet wings. His beard and mustache where neatly groomed making him look like one of those legendary old men of the sea.

“Well, the meal looks exquisite, ladies. Come let us feast and then we'll have a nice little get together over dessert.” he ordered and with that picked up his knife and fork and dug into his dinner.

We all followed suit.

All during the meal, I followed Angelica's lead, eating in small bites and sipping gently from the glass. Following the captain's instructions, we kept conversation to a minimum during the meal except for the passing around of dishes.

I felt a guilty glow over how many times I was asked to pass a dish that was close to me to Gordon. Every time I passed a dish to him, his eyes seemed to smolder and I felt my heart give a little jump. *What in the off-worlds was happening here I was behaving like a romantic school girl?*

After dinner was done, Angelica and I gathered the dishes, dumped them into the autowasher in the galley and served dessert.

After dessert, the captain looked up.

“That was a delightful meal. Now down to business. Tomorrow morning, we will lift off and proceed to our next stop, Delos Major. There, we will meet the *Serendipity* and take on a load of urgently needed pharmaceuticals for the planet Neus Sierra.

“From there, we will proceed at flank speed for Neus Sierra. Once there, we will deliver the drugs and load Neus Sierran wine before making way to the trading center at Ventix in the Shakespear Sector. Now that has a flight time of thirty two days, including layovers, so we'll be in port at Ventix come your next pay, with a healthy bonus, I might add.”

With that the crew gave out a satisfied grunt and turned back respectfully to the captain. The captain gave a brief run down of himself and his career. He then called on each of us to deliver our own brief description of ourselves and our career.

First Mate, Gordon Scott, one day, wanted to command a merchant ship of his own and had come from a long line of privateers. His father had become famous during the Agresti Uprising as a privateer for the Galactic Commonwealth. He had been educated in the merchant service by his father and had attended a brief stint at the Galactic Commonwealth Reserve as a spaceship gunner.

Chief Purser Angelica Ward wanted to become a permanent Chief Purser or perhaps a corporate accountant and had come from a long line of ancestors who were proficient in the mercantile trade.

When it finally got to me, I was totally nervous, but I managed to stammer out, “I'm, uh, Cassandra Berrie from Ameth, Kaistarius. I'm, uh, glad to be here and I want to be the Chief Purser on a Galactic Cruise ship, someday, or at least the Cruise Director.”

“You're Angelica's niece, correct?” asked Captain Baxter politely.

“Yes, Captain. I, uh, was lucky she remembered me for this job. It was looking a little rough since the depression that followed the Damocles Uprising,” I replied, starting to feel a bit more confident.

“What did you do before this?” asked Gordon eyeing me carefully.

I thought quickly and then replied, “I was a student at Ameth Ardan University.”

“That's a girl's college, isn't it, hon?” asked Angelica prompting me.

“Yes, it is,” I replied looking down quickly.

“What did you study?” Gordon asked with a smile.

“Catering and Hotel Recreation Management,” I answered with a smile of my own.

“Very good, Miss Berrie. You're next, Rosco,” said the captain dismissing me with a flash of his eyes, much to my relief.

“Well,” muttered Rosco. “First of all, I think this voyage's a bad idea. Bringing women along and all. Now I know you've got a thing for Ward, cap, but this other young lady is just trouble.”

“Why do you say that, Rosco?” asked Gordon pointedly.

“The young one will tempt the lads away from their work. They won't work squat if she's around,” he answered.

“If that's a problem, Mr. Chief Engineer, I'll try to make it a point to stay out of the Engine Room,” I replied tartly.

“That ain't the problem, missy. Just knowing you're here is enough,” he replied glaring at me.

“That's enough, Rosco! Now tell the lads and lasses your background,” interjected the captain quickly.

“Aye, sir,” replied Rosco going into his, obviously, much repeated spiel.

After all the introductions were over, the captain dismissed us telling us to get some sleep because we would be lifting off in the morning. After the others had left, Angelica and I put away the dessert dishes and the glasses in the autowasher and activated the cleaning robots.

When we got back to our cabin, Angelica said, “Not too bad, Cassandra. That was a good extemporization you made on your background. It fits in nicely with your reasons for being here. Though, I'd watch out for Rosco. He's a little touched in the head.”

“I noticed! What's his problem anyway?”

“Don't know. He's always been like that. Well, it's to bed with us now. You want to use the bathroom first, or shall I?”

“You go first,” I answered setting down on the edge of the bed kicking off my pumps.

Soon I heard the shower running and after a half hour it was my turn. After sonic-ing off, I was greeted by Angelica who handed me a pink silk lace trimmed nightie. I was so tired, that I put it on without any argument and was soon blissfully asleep with the fragrance of roses and vanilla surrounding me.

The next morning came awfully early with me and Angelica having to get up at four o'clock in order to get breakfast out before we took off. It was a fast instant breakfast as we didn't have time to cook.

Angelica had helped me with my make-up again that morning, but I had started to experiment with it myself before she took me, once again, in hand. It appeared that the previous occupant of my cabin had been a Susan Mei who had quit the previous run to this one. It was surprising that Susan had nearly been the same size as me. Angelica said that she would show me how to alter my other uniforms later if I needed to.

At five o'clock, the captain's voice came on the intercom.

"Attention all hands, this is the captain. Report immediately to your lift off stations. Countdown commences in thirty minutes with liftoff occurring at 0600. That is all."

"Where do we go for lift off?" I asked Angelica as we finished putting the breakfast dishes in the autowasher after having put away the previous evening's dishes.

"Come along. Our station is in the Computer Room Annex near the Main Computer. We'll be monitoring the cargo holds on the computer while we lift off."

"Right," I answered shutting the autowasher, but not turning it on.

We left the dining area and took the elevator in the spinal up to the Computer Room Annex. There, we took chairs at the consoles and strapped ourselves in.

Angelica showed me how to configure the monitors to show us the cargo holds in small pictures across the monitor screen. Angelica had given me the port side cargo holds to watch as she took care of the starboard holds.

At T-minus fifteen minutes, Angelica said, "Activate the voice activator on your left. You will have to give orders to the computer in case one of the crates breaks loose. Just tell it which crate is loosening and what to do about it."

"Right, Angelica," I replied pushing the actuator.

"Yes. How may I serve you?" asked the computer politely.

"Begin monitoring Cargo Bays 2, 4 & 6," I answered.

"Acknowledged, mistress. Monitoring begins."

"Do you know me?" I asked the computer in amazement.

"Affirmative, mistress. I assisted you with your shower yesterday. I maintain all records on all authorized personnel on this vessel."

"What do you know about me?" I asked pointedly.

"Name:Cassandra Judith Berrie. Date of Birth:January 22, 3136. Age:26. Sex:female occupation:Assistant Purser. Education: Ameth Lower, Middle and High School. Ameth Ardan University and you have a B. A. in Catering and Hotel Recreation Management. Martial Status:Single. Only known living relative:Angelica Christina Ward."

"Who gave you this information?" I asked.

"Information comes from the Central Ameth Registry," answered the computer punctually.

“Angelica?” I asked in a whining voice.

“Computer disregard the following,” ordered Angelica.

“Affirmative, mistress.”

“Don't worry about it, Cassandra. I took care of everything while you were asleep. After we lift off, I'll be happy to explain it to you. Now you just watch the cargo like you're supposed to. Computer, normal operations,” Angelica said irritably.

“Acknowledged, mistress. T-minus ten minutes and counting.”

I just sat there in a huff. *What had she meant? She had taken care of everything?*

The computer couldn't lie when it had said it had found the information it had displayed to me. Even the pictures it had flashed on the screen detailing my life that went along with the read out had looked like me as a girl! It was scary to see photos of a little girl who wasn't me as I was growing up, yet this soulless machine had identified them as me!

At T-minus five minutes, the engines began their warming up sequence and the ship began to vibrate on her landing jacks. At T-minus ten seconds, the ship was rattling like it was coming apart at the seams as the primary fusion motors started their firing sequence.

As I watched, I noticed the strap on two of the crates break simultaneously. There wasn't enough time to re-strap them down. I had to think fast or else, the cargo in that section would be ruined by flying debris from the two crates that were breaking loose.

“Computer. Grab Crate 2-00345 and wedge it into the space between crates 2-00227 and 2-00228. Grab Crate 2-00888 and wedge it into the space between crates 2-00333 and 2-00334. Maintain grapple contact at all times,” I ordered quickly.

“Affirmative, mistress. I must warn you, that extenuator damage may occur on the grapples.”

“Acknowledged, computer,” I answered sarcastically.

At zero, the ship gave out a loud groan as it picked itself off the landing apron of its landing pit and rose into the sky. At least that was what I hoped was happening! The ship seemed to be coming apart from the sound of it, but the *Egland* managed to jack herself off the apron and into the sky.

After about five minutes of bone crushing pressure, the captain said, “Attention. We have achieved escape velocity and the artificial gravity generators have kicked in. In ten minutes we will be activating the hyperdrive. After that, it will be normal routine till our arrival at Delos Major. Please standby at your station until the initiation of the hyperdrive. Captain, out.”

“Well, we're on our way,” I said at last.

“So we are, Cassandra. Computer re-strap the two loose crates in hold 2.”

“Acknowledged, mistress.”

“Deactivate voice interface,” ordered Angelica.

“Acknowledged, mistress,” replied the computer shutting off its voice link.

“Okay. Now that it's no longer monitoring us, I'll explain everything. Now, since some people are bound to check on you. I took the liberty of obtaining some fake records for you. It was easy enough since most of the Ameth records were lost in the Damoscles Uprising. I just substituted my niece's information for yours,” explained Angelica in a light voice.

“Won't the real Cassandra get in trouble?” I asked earnestly.

“No. She's been dead for the past ten years. She was only sixteen when she died. If she had lived, she would be about the same age as you. I have a friend in the Galactic Registry Office who helped me, as she owed me a favor. I hope you appreciate the risk I took in order to falsify these records.”

I felt my heart go out to her and replied, “Certainly, I do, hon. It's just that it's only for a month. It is a lot of trouble for you to go through for just that much time.”

“It is worth it, though,” answered Angelica. “Because I never got to know my niece as a grown up woman and you look so much like her that, well, it's like I get to know her for a month. It's kind of a memorial to the way I wished things could have been between us.”

Now I understood what was behind all that had happened to me so far. The disappearance of my clothes, her dressing me up and passing me off as her niece. She was trying to atone for all the missed years with her niece. Slowly, I nodded my head.

“I understand, Aunt Angelica.”

She flashed me an open grin that seemed to brighten the room.

As I basked in that glow, the captain came on the intercom saying, “Attention all hands. Hyperdrive initiation will occur in fifteen seconds. Stand by.”

At the count of zero, the hyperdrive kicked in.

As the tingling sensation of the drive hit me, I caught a distorted glimpse of another time and place in my mind's eye. What I saw appeared to be a wedding. The bells peeling as the commissar said the final words of that most ancient of vows. As the groom kissed the bride, I saw, to my utter amazement, that I was the bride!

As quickly as it had come, it was gone again as the ship came to its standard cruising speed in hyperspace and the glimpse receded in my memory leaving me only a faint impression of it all.

I looked quizzically at Angelica who just shrugged and said, “Sometimes during hyperdrive transitions there occurs a sort of distorted dream view of the future or past. They're just possibilities, really. Not all come true. Whatever was it that you saw?”

“Whatever it was, it is impossible. What next?”

“Standard routine, now. Let's get started. After lunch, it is to bed with you because I got the day to evening watch and you got the midnight to day watch,” she said unstrapping herself.

“All right, auntie.”