

\*The Trillionaire's Toy\*

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You know (began the Earth Mother), I was a pretty good-looking woman 25 or 30 years ago. I realize it's hard to believe now, but that's because sooner or later gravity catches up with all of us. But back then, I was a knockout. I looked just like Sinderella, only I was blonde. (Or, at least, I was frequently blonde.)

Most people, when they heard about Moses Jacoby Zanzabell, who was the galaxy's first and only trillionaire, couldn't believe anyone could be so rich. I didn't have any problem with that. I couldn't believe anyone could be so ugly.

I was working at the Tower of Babel, a high-class brothel located on Green Cheese, a moon of Pirelli VII, when I first saw him. Oh, I knew who he was, all right; a man like that doesn't exactly dwell in obscurity.

Anyway, he came into the place, left his bodyguards at the door, and spent a few minutes considering his choice -- and then he selected me.

Now, not only was he the ugliest man I'd ever seen, but he was also in the running for the foulest-smelling one as well. So when he announced that he wanted to spend the night with me, I refused. This seemed to amuse him, because he was obviously not used to people denying him anything he wanted. He walked over to me, pulled out his wallet, and placed a fat wad of banknotes in my hand.

"A million credits for one night," he said with a smile -- and I noticed that he needed dental work too.

"Not interested," I said.

"But you work here!" he insisted. "You can't say no to a paying customer."

"I just did."

"Well, it's against the law for a business to advertise a service and then reject a legitimate offer."

"Okay," I said. "I quit."

"Just a minute!" he said urgently. "No one's ever turned me down before."

"Consider it a learning experience," I told him.

"I consider it stimulating beyond belief," he admitted. "It's a brand-new experience."

"I'm not trying to stimulate you," I said. "Just the opposite."

"It's not working," he said. "Now, what'll it take to make you change your mind?"

"Nothing you can say or do," I told him.

"I didn't get where I am by taking no for an answer," he said, walking to the door. "I'll be back."

And sure enough, he was back the next night.

"All right," he said, walking right up to me. "Let's go."

"Go where?" I asked.

"I own palaces all over the galaxy," he said. "I just built one on New Fiji. I think we'll go there."

"I'm not going anywhere," I said.

"Yes you are," he said. "Check with the government."

"What has the government got to do with it?" I demanded.

"They declared you a living monument in exchange for a ten million credit donation," said Zanzabell.

"Then, since they control the sale of all monuments, they agreed to let me purchase you for another forty million credits." He smiled. "I \_own\_ you."

I had my lawyer check it out, and somehow it was all true. Now, I realize it seems crazy to spend fifty million credits for a woman -- \_any\_ woman -- but as he explained it, he made more than that every ten seconds, so it didn't seem quite as crazy to him.

So I went to New Fiji with him, and he showed me my room, which would have comfortably held two murderball fields and a race track. The bathroom could have held a small lake, and \_did\_ sport an impressive waterfall. Zanzabell stopped at the door and told me he'd be by to pay me a visit in an hour.

I had barely finished exploring my new quarters when he showed up, carrying a bottle of Cygnian cognac. He didn't smell any better than usual, so I suggested we drink first. He filled our glasses, and he drained his while he was ogling me, and before I'd even taken a sip of my own drink, he'd made it halfway through his second glass.

He started slurring his words by the third glass, and I saw he had trouble focusing his eyes by the fourth. I kept him talking until he'd finished the whole damned bottle. When he finally decided it was time to take me to bed, he stood up, reached a hand in my direction, and collapsed onto the floor.

I dragged him to the bed, managed to lift him onto it, and took a long, luxurious bath. When I was through, I dialed up a good book on my computer and spent the next few hours reading it, until I heard him starting to stir in the bed.

"Where are you?" he mumbled.

"Right here," I said, walking over to him.

"I can't remember a thing," he said.

"I remember everything," I said. "You were fabulous!"

"I was?"

"The best I've ever had," I assured him. "Don't you remember?"

"Ah, yes," he said. "Now it all comes back to me. I really \_was\_ fabulous, wasn't I?" He got shakily to his feet. "I'll see you again tonight."

And when he came to my room, I saw to it that we had a repeat performance of the previous night.

The third night he brought drugs along with the liquor. I pretended to take them while he used up the entire supply.

This went on for almost two months. Each night he would get so drunk or stoned that he passed out, and each morning I would tell him how wonderful he'd been in bed and how much he had pleased me, and he

always pretended to remember rather than admit that he couldn't recall a single thing.

I realized that I couldn't keep this up forever, so after 60 days had passed, I asked for my freedom.

He refused.

Now, I could have tried to escape, but he had guards everywhere, and I'd never have made it to the front gate. And I could have tried to win my freedom in the courts, but my lawyer assured me that it could take years. I could have waited for some hero like Catastrophe Baker or Hurricane Smith to rescue me, but the fact was that I didn't know any heroes back then.

So I decided to take advantage of the same male psychology that had kept me safe thus far.

The next time I saw Zanzabell, I threw my arms around him, apologized for being so foolish as to ask for my freedom, and swore my eternal love for him. He disengaged himself and looked very uncomfortable.

"You're all I want!" I panted. "All I'll ever want! Once a day isn't enough anymore! I want you to visit me in my room at least three times a day -- and I'll kill any woman who tries to stop you!"

"Nobody gives me orders!" he snapped. "Now back away!"

"But you're all I live for!" I told him. "You're even better in bed than you are in business, and I won't share you with anyone!"

He suddenly looked like a trapped animal.

"Get away from me!" he said.

"Never!" I cried, kneeling down and grabbing his legs.

Well, he had his men pull me away and lock me in my room, and every day for the next week I repeated my performance, and he kept looking more and more like a trapped animal as the week wore on, and finally he just ordered his guards to give me my freedom and return me to the Tower of Babel.

I cashed in all the jewels he had given me in exchange for the sexual favors he was sure he'd gotten, and used the proceeds to buy my own brothel. Thanks to my knowledge of the male of the species, it was a remarkable success.

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"So he never once got you into bed?" asked Sinderella.

"That's right," said the Earth Mother.

"If the Reverend doesn't calm down, we have to have a long talk."

"What the hell is going on?" demanded the Cyborg de Milo angrily.

"I don't think I understand the question, ma'am," said Catastrophe Baker.

"There's a war out there! Aliens have decimated the Navy. They've already landed on Henrys IV and V, and they're headed for Henry II. And all anyone wants to do is talk!"

"That's not quite all we want to do, honey," said the Reverend Billy Karma.

"You lay a finger on me and I'll lay one on you," said Venus in a threatening tone, "and we'll see who has

the more potent finger." She turned to Baker and Smith. "I can understand the rest of these clowns, but you two are bonafide heroes. Why are you still sitting around this place instead of going out there and wiping out those alien scum?"

"What's your hurry?" asked Smith. "No one's shooting at the Outpost yet."

"Right," added Baker. "It's been my experience that there ain't no problem so urgent today that it won't be even more urgent tomorrow."

"Besides," said Bet-a-World O'Grady, "everyone knows that violence is the last resort of the incompetent."

"The competent don't wait that long," said Venus contemptuously.

"I never yet saw a war that was worth rushing into," said Smith.

"Right," agreed Baker. "If this war can't stick around until we're ready to fight it, it wasn't worth the effort in the first place."

The Cyborg de Milo got to her feet and walked to the door.

"To hell with all of you!" she said. "There's vermin out there that needs defenestrating! I'll do the job alone if I have to!"

She stalked out of the Outpost and headed back to her ship.

"I never saw anyone so goddamned anxious to get her head blown off," said Three-Gun Max.

"Lot of guts, though," opined the Gravedigger.

"Good-looking broad, too," added the Reverend Billy Karma.

"Fine," said Sinderella. "Chase her for awhile."

"She's off to fight the aliens," said Billy Karma. "Just how crazy do I look?"

"Do you want a frank answer or a friendly one?" asked Sinderella.

"I withdraw the question," said the Reverend uncomfortably.

"That's a mighty brave lady facing mighty long odds," said Smith. He looked over at Baker. "You think we ought to go with her?"

"I got room for a couple of more drinks yet," answered Baker. "Maybe by then they'll have taken a shot at us and we'll have a real reason to fight."

"Yeah," said Smith thoughtfully. "I suppose you're right."

\_"He's wrong."\_

It was a voice no one had ever heard before.

"Who said that?" I demanded.

Reggie, my robot bartender, rolled over to me. "I did, Tomahawk."

"You?" I exclaimed. "I didn't know you could talk."

"I've always been able to," said Reggie.

"But you've been tending bar here since the day we opened and you've never said a word!"

"I never had anything to say until now."

"And now you do?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I've been listening to everyone's stories, and now I've got one of my own to tell."

"We're all ears," said Baker.

"It doesn't have a title," said Reggie, "because I am just a robot, and not creative like the rest of you. So with your permission, I will just call it Reggie's Story."