

Homecoming

By Velvet Belle Tree

with Brantley Thompson Elkins

Part I – Outward From Nova Iberia

1. Points of Departure

She approached the ship and saw a Scalantran coming towards her.

“I’m Remba Aleeza and I will be your guide and helper aboard the ship.”

“Hello. I’m Ju’lette Raul’lan.”

“Since we will be together a great deal, please call me Aleeza. Unlike your people, we have our personal names last. Remba is my group name, but we only use it on formal occasions or when there might be confusion.”

Ju’lette could tell that Aleeza was female, although the differences were not as obvious as those of humans and you had to know them for a while before being aware of the subtle differences. The shape of the ears was slightly different, the females’ being rounder on top and the lobes being slightly longer. And the females’ nasal openings were more of an oval shape and smaller than the males’. Of course, Ju’lette had no knowledge of the Scalantrans’ genitalia; no human had ever seen one naked.

All Scalantrans were well over seven feet tall and very slender, seeming to have not a drop of body fat. Their bodies were covered by very fine brick red hair and their large round eyes were a startling yellow. But it was their hands which fascinated Ju'lette; they each had six fingers with two opposable thumbs.

"Luckily, our ship was fitted for transportation of Companions, so there is a suitable room for your use," Aleeza continued.

"This will be quite adequate," said Ju'lette as she viewed her quarters. "Don Alfonso was never concerned about my comfort. "

"From what I have been taught of Terrans, their cultures are very different from ours. I will try to spend as much time with you as possible so that we can learn about each other's societies. But we have lost so many people that I must do other work as well. We are in a crisis situation -- many of our departments are inadequately manned. We have heads of departments who are not fully trained. We will have a full council meeting tomorrow to decide what to do.

"But for now, please make yourself comfortable. I will be back shortly with food for you. We have enough food that Terrans can eat, even though some might not be familiar to you."

Ju'lette put away her clothes and the few other possessions she had brought with her. She didn't want the jewelry that Don Alfonso had given her, for he had only wanted to adorn her to flaunt his wealth and show her off as one of his most enviable possessions. She had left the jewels with Almeida, thinking that she might sell them to have some money of her own while the legal authorities argued over the distribution of Don Alfonso's estate.

It would take her less than three years to reach Velor, Ju'lette had figured.

She had figured wrong. It would end up taking more than twice that long.

It wasn't the arithmetic she failed to understand. It had taken her three years to reach Nova Iberia on the Scalantran trade ship -- and that included the stopovers, which didn't last long but added months to the overall travel time, what with the deceleration from and the acceleration back to the wormholes.

No, what she failed to understand was that the Scalantrans had other priorities.

It had begun with the children. She hadn't expected them. Travel Captain Marpolom hadn't even mentioned them. She had assumed that the only survivors were himself and his crew. These were the only Scalantrans she had seen her first day aboard.

Yet suddenly, there the children were, having emerged from their hidey-holes built into false walls between the cargo bays, together with a few adults from the trade groups -- weak, hungry and thirsty from their confinement, but otherwise unharmed. They had remained in recovery rooms to be tended and fed, to regain their strength. Only now were they beginning to make free of the ship again.

"We informed their General Tsander that the children had been left at Meetpoint, that our cohort of younglings had reached first change, that it was time for them to learn the things they must learn to become functional members of the adult community. He believed this; he had no reason to doubt it. But we could never have made him believe that the traders had been left behind. Therefore all but a few of them had to die. They accepted this."

"And should the Aureans have discovered the deception? Or should you not have contrived to dispose of Tsander?"

"Then they too would have died. Less painfully, by gas, if we could release it in time; but just as surely. We have contingencies, Contingencies that are known to all of us, but shared with none others. Except for you, it now appears. We must trust in your discretion."

"You have it. I regret that Liz'bet and I could not have been of greater help to you."

"Had you not destroyed the other ships, we would surely have been put to death when we were no longer needed. We would have gassed the others, as I said. Had we reckoned that they were in danger of imminent starvation, it would have been the same. You made such decisions unnecessary. For that we are grateful.

"And yet, I regret that we cannot accommodate your request for immediate transport to Velor. We have necessities of our own."

The decision had already been made in ship's council -- what was left of it.

Jonjerem looked out at the sparsely occupied Council Chamber and sighed. Even though all the ship's crew who were not essential for operations were attending the meeting, it still felt empty. He had long been the ship's historian and enjoyed the task of chronicling the lives of those living aboard the ship. But the terrible burden of completing the history of so many who had lost their lives to the Aureans had worn him out, physically and emotionally.

When they had settled down, Jonjerem slowly rose and addressed the gathering. "You have felt the absences in your mate-groups, you have felt it at work. Now look around and see how many are gone from the ship's complement — see how we are hurting. We must not let our missing brethren be forgotten, or their lives to have been in vain. How can we see to it that their lives be remembered? Only by carrying on with the life of the ship."

"How can we carry on?" one of the demanded. "We are too few. My mate-group is so small and unbalanced that we can't conduct rituals."

"There are not enough of us to run the ship and to carry out trade negotiations," a male said.

A female rose and said: "Our children are so disturbed, more of us have to sleep with them at night."

"Then we must replenish our ranks," Jonjerem answered. "We must go to our closest Meetpoint planet and recruit new members for our mate-groups. If we cannot find enough to fill the vacant positions we will spend time there to train people. Then we can take Ju'lette home to Velor, thus discharging our debt for her gallantry against the Aureans."

Jonjerem had said only what they all thought, what they all knew. But it had to be said for the record. The Scalantrans were people of records, and for the *Far Wanderer* he was the keeper and even the shaper of those records.

But he could hardly bear to keep and shape them now. For him, the *Far Wanderer* was now a ship of ghosts, and when they accomplished their mission at the Meetpoint world, it would become a ship of strangers. The younger survivors, the bridge and engine crews, could adapt. But he was no longer young. He longed for a peace that he knew he could no longer find here.

This would be his last journey with the ship he loved, the ship he would have to forsake *because* he loved it. But it was not yet the proper time to share this with the others. They had too much else on their minds.

Even had there been no serious casualties, Marpolom told Ju'lette now, it would have been a matter of necessity to inform the nearest regional Factor General, who would see that word reached the other Factors General -- and the Grand Factor and Grand Assembly.

"The entire League must be kept informed of the actions and presumed intentions of the Aureans," he explained. "The attack on the *Far Wanderer* could represent a serious escalation in hostilities. Until now, they have simply invited us to leave systems they have occupied. That was our latest information. It may be out of date. In any event, our own information must be evaluated at the highest levels."

Ju'lette had heard of the First Strike, of course; but to her it was only an historical incident of no great import. To Captain Marpolom and the other Scalantrans, it was one of the crucial events of their history -- as fundamental as the Swarming that had launched their trading empire.

As ship's historian, Jonjerem was custodian for the *Far Wanderer* of their entire history -- not just of the ship, but of the race. That was what made him important, what had made him worth saving, what had earned him a place in the hiding places with the children. The facts were all on record, in the data banks; but only Jonjerem could make the younglings *feel* them through his inspired orations.

Because of him, they had known the necessity of the drills, the necessity to keep silent, no matter how great their pain and fear. They felt the consequences of the First Strike, the wrath it had incurred, as if it had happened to their generation, to themselves. They knew how fearsome their Enemy could be, and how their chance of survival -- however slight -- depended on absolute discipline.

That discipline now governed the entire ship. The Ship's Council had been a formality; only one course of action was possible.

By sheer chance, Meetpoint World 17 was no further distant from Nova Iberia than Andros, the nearest human world with a resident Factor General. But it was in the opposite direction -- further from already distant Velor.

2. Liz'bet and Ju'lette

Ju'lette had been glad that she had a chance to talk to Liz'bet before leaving Nova Iberia. "Gabriel was a good man, and I'm truly sorry he was killed. But I'm not sorry they

killed Don Alfonso – he deserved it. Funny, when I first saw him I thought he was so handsome. But I grew to hate the sight of him.”

Liz’bet got a far away look on her face, as if memories were going through her mind. “Gabriel was not handsome, but his face had great character. Looking at him, you felt that this was a good man, a man you could trust. And at first, he wouldn’t even touch me — which made me want him even more.”

“He wouldn’t touch you? That’s hard to believe. Why?”

“He said that he would never force himself on me -- as if he could! But he felt that the terms of indenture gave me no choice, so if he took me it would be a form of force.”

“What did you do?”

“I knew that I had to show him that I wanted him – that wanting him had nothing to do with being indentured to him – that when it came to lovemaking he was not my master. After that... well, things just got better and better and we truly loved each other.”

“Alfonso didn’t waste any time. As soon as we were in his house he had me on his bed. After a while, normal sex no longer interested him. He just wanted to hurt me, and it infuriated him that he couldn’t. And the things that he did to me ... When he lashed me and tried to hurt my breasts or thrust sharp objects inside me – it just gave me pleasure. But I grew to hate myself for feeling that pleasure.” Ju’lette paused, and then said: “But tell me, what is sex like with someone you love?”

Liz’bet shook her head. “It isn’t one thing – it’s everything. When things were going well it was a celebration; and when things weren’t going well, we found consolation in each other’s arms. It seemed that his greatest pleasure was to give me pleasure, and when I saw his pleasure, it gave me great joy. Some nights, we would run the gamut of emotions. Passionate, then playful, then wild, then calm. And in between we’d talk and laugh together. And at times, when we were sated, we’d experience the most wonderful sense of peace.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Oh, everything. What had happened that day, ideas to improve the mills... No, not everything. The one thing we never spoke about was Beatriz. It hurt when he told me he was going to marry. But here, marriage and love are two separate things. He married for children – something I couldn’t give him. And he married Beatriz for her family’s connections.

“But he told me that nothing could ever change how he felt about me. So I told him I understood, although it was the hardest thing I ever had to do. But when we were alone together, it was as if she didn’t exist. And when I was with Beatriz and the family, we all pretended that I was just a special employee who lived and ate with the family.”

“What about Esteban?”

“Well, you wouldn’t guess it from our present relationship, but at first, it was not easy.”

“Can you tell me about it?”

“I can tell you, Ju’lette — I don’t know any other woman who might understand.

“One night, after we had made love, Gabriel said to me, ‘Liz’bet, there is something that I would like you to do. It’s time for Esteban to become a man. I want you to go to him – I want you to be his first woman.’

“I was angry with him. ‘You want him to be initiated?’ I told him. ‘Hire a whore like everyone else does – do not treat me like a common harlot!’

“He seemed really hurt. ‘Liz’bet ... Liz’bet. I would never treat you like a whore. I do not want him initiated into sex – I want him to learn to love a woman and no woman can do it better than you. Please, teach him to be a man.’

“So I went to Esteban to please Gabriel. Oh, Esteban was just a boy and so eager! And so strong and virile! And after a while I saw the great potential in him, and knew I

could help him become the man his father was. I love him for his youth and for the man I know he will become.”

So much like Tassos, Ju'lette thought now. Liz'bet wouldn't know anything about Tassos, of course. She too must have had her final exam, decades earlier, with one of the Lottery Boys.

The Lottery Boys... like the Companions themselves, they had been thought up by the Scalantrans.

3. Meanwhile...

Mican entered his group's sleep/resting room, looking around for Aleeza, his current one-mate. They were both among the fortunate survivors -- she an engineer, he an experienced navigator. As such, he had been especially fortunate to be chosen to survive, and it had taken some days for him to recover after coming out from hiding.

He saw her entwined with an older male, whose face he couldn't see. He looked around some more until he saw Syna who had looked up from her reading when she heard him enter. She held out her right hand with her thumbs stretched out. Slowly she brought them together, while looking straight at him, as an invitation to spend the night with her.

He approached her, making the same invitational gesture. They found a comfortable spot and curled up together. Their lovemaking started gently and then gained in passion. They did not hold back their cries of delight nor were they disturbed by those of the others in the room, for to be with the group during the act of love was natural to them. Sometimes, however, couples went off alone to add some zest to their lovemaking, but this was rarely possible on a ship.

They lay together sated, gently stroking each other and talking over the days events. Aleeza came over and sat down beside them.

“Reegan has just fallen asleep. He’s still hurting from the loss of Saleeva. Off and on over the years, they spent much time together as one-mates. I hope I was able to comfort him.”

Mican responded: “What male would not find comfort in your arms? Go back to him so that he will not wake up alone.”

4. The Lottery Boys

When the Companions Academy’s Board of Governors realized that it would be terrible if a Companion injured her master by not being able to control her strength during sex, they taught them techniques of safe sex. But, they felt that it would be necessary to give each girl a final exam with a real frail to prove that she had learned her lessons well.

They approached the Scalantrans trading with them and explained the situation. “Any young man would be happy to administer the final exam, even though there would be some danger involved if a girl was not sufficiently adept at safe sex. But we only want sexually experienced young men.

“They should be past their teens but unattached, since we don’t want to cause any problems for their families. They must also be in excellent health. And they must sign a legal document claiming that they understand the risks and exonerating us from any responsibility in the case of injury.

“We will tell you how many men we need each year and pay you a set amount for each. Your task is to recruit them in any way you see fit and then transport them here and return them home after their tasks are finished.”

The Scalntrans involved in Trade met in Council. The whole idea seemed strange to them, but they knew how different Velorian culture was from their own. They also saw it as an excellent business opportunity. Many schemes were presented and discussed. They all agreed that it would be most economical to recruit all the men from the same planet and it would be most fair and advantageous to recruit from a different planet each year. Only planets which were space faring and knew about the Companions could participate.

“If they pay us a set fee, we probably won’t make much profit,” one of them said.

“If the young men would all be so eager to do this, how do we choose?” another asked.

“I know of a way to solve both problems”, their trade captain Andrucarn said. “We can hold a lottery, only allowing qualified men to participate. The cost of the lottery tickets would be non-trivial but not exorbitant. Then we would randomly select the needed number of ticket holders. I’m sure that on each planet we would sell enough tickets to make a nice profit.”

His scheme was readily accepted, and the tradition of the Lottery began with the winners being known as “Lottery Boys”. A publicity campaign was devised, extolling the beauty and sexual expertise of the future Companions and the ecstasy that the lucky winners would find in their arms.

In Ju’lette’s second year at the Companions’ Academy, the Lottery was held on Andros. Andros had the distinction of being the planet on which Kalla Zaver’el, the first of the Companions, had been indentured and was still living.

After three centuries, the Scalntrans had mixed feelings about Kalla. She had indeed succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of Velor, becoming a mover and shaker on Andros long past the term of her indenture. She had served not only the patriarchs

but the world itself, fostering an industrial revolution and bringing what was once a medieval world into the nuclear and the space age.

Admirable achievements those, but with her creation of Syntrofia Kosmos, Andros had achieved its own interstellar capability -- and the planet was no longer dependent on the Scalantrans for all its trade. True, Andros was still a small frog in a big pond, and the Scalantran trade routes extended much further into that pond. Still... it was necessary for the League to offer something that the Syntrofia could not. The lottery was one of those things. Not only could the tickets sell in far greater volume and at far higher prices than on more primitive worlds, but the publicity was good for business generally.

Although none of the Lottery Boys actually knew Kalla, her fame was widespread as were her achievements. They had all seen her pictures and she played a starring role in their sexual fantasies.

The Lottery Boys got to know each other pretty well during the trip. They boasted to each other of their sexual prowess, as young men are wont to do. And they all tried to hide their nervousness at making it with a future Companion.

But they also spoke of their families' reactions to their winning the Lottery.

"My Dad helped me with the money for the ticket," Andreas Kanovos said. "He was real happy for me when I won. I think he's a little jealous and would like to be me, but he has to be really careful not to let Mom know how he feels."

"Is your mother Euphemia, by any chance?" Menas Antonopoulos asked.

Euphemia Kanovos was the leader of a neoclassical movement that had revived the old Byzantine art of mosaics. The new Petrovousa, or world palace, was built on the model of the Hagia Sophia -- only on a far larger scale -- and decorated with mosaics of Feodor, Jayar, Nestor and other patriarchs. Not to mention Kalla herself.

This was a grave offense to those few still loyal to the Orthodox Church, who treasured their icons of Jesus and Mary and the saints. Only in Christ lay true salvation,

they cried. But for most Androssians, the fact that Kalla had saved their world from the Aureans -- a story so familiar to everyone that it was rarely discussed -- was more than enough; the believers' protests had briefly made the news, and then been forgotten.

"Don't I wish," Andrea said. "But Mom's an accountant with Zorba & Gios."

Nobody else had even heard of Zorba & Gios, so conversation returned to the real subject at hand.

"My Mom thinks I'm crazy," Menas complained. "Said 'All you boys think about is sex. Don't you know this is dangerous? Well, if you must do it, just make sure she doesn't crush your equipment -- I want to be a grandmother!'"

They speculated on the specifics of the final exam.

"Do you think we get to have only one or more than one?" one of them asked, not being sure which he preferred.

"Do you think we get to choose who we want?" another boy, who had trouble hiding his nervousness, asked.

"Who cares," he was answered. "They're all fantastically gorgeous and I hear that they're all horny as hell."

But one of them, Tassos Vakros, was quieter than the others. Not only did he fantasize about Kalla, but in his heart he worshipped her. He thought of her as a goddess. And the thought that he would have the privilege of worshipping a Velorian like her with his body sometimes overwhelmed him.

Tassos' father was a subcontractor for Syntrofia Kosmos, but he never mentioned that to the others. He would never seek to be honored for achievements that were not his own. Kalla had earned his worship, not only for her beauty but for what she had done for Andros. Would that he could be worthy of her -- and worthy of his world when he returned.

It was a long journey, although not quite as long as it had once been. The Vendorian steel ships now used by the Scalantrans were lighter and had better engines than those that had paid their first visit to Velor centuries earlier. They were better than anything the Velorians had, or even the Aureans. But the Scalantrans could afford them. That made all the difference.

Still, it would take fourteen months to reach their goal. Some of the Lottery Boys played with sex dolls, or watched erotic holos, or both. Tassos, too, sometimes used the dolls—he was only human. But he also spent a lot of time in the ship's library, watching myriads of worlds come to life on the screen, drinking in the sights and sounds of a hundred cultures. It was strange that most of them had originated on old Earth, and yet were so different from one another.

Nobody visited Earth, he had been told. At least, nobody was supposed to, except for the Seeders -- if they were still active. But the library said that Earth still had many cultures, and that some still had yet to make contact with each other. How could that be, on such a small world, on a pebble in the sky?

5. Remembrance of Things Past

Time passed slowly aboard the *Far Wanderer*, and there was only so much that Ju'lette could do to fill it. She studied the Scalantrans -- their language and their ways -- more than she ever had on the journey from Velor to Nova Iberia.

She had never met a Scalantran when she first heard about the Companions, and what she had heard of them was only that they were alien and ugly but performed useful services to Velor -- which without them would still be a primitive world, isolated from the rest of the galaxy. She still had her diaries from that time -- less than a decade ago, and yet it seemed so much longer. *Is that really me in those pages*, she wondered now.

But of course, it was.

I thought the day after my 16th Birthday party would be dull, but things picked up in the afternoon. An older man and woman came to talk to Mom and Dad. I wasn't there, but was able to hear them from the next room. Jor'lun was also there, but I made him go to his room — really didn't want my nine year old brother also listening.

The woman said they were from the Selection Committee for the Companions Academy. Told Mom and Dad what a beautiful, strong and intelligent daughter they had! Wow -- I was impressed with myself. Said I'd make a perfect Companion and would bring much needed currency to Velor and prestige to my family. They warned them that once I left Velor to be a Companion they would never see me again. The term of indenture is 100 years.

I was surprised to hear Mom say "What would Ju'lette gain from being a Companion?"

"The chance to serve the people of Velor, go off planet, put her abilities to good use. And of course, being off planet in a lower gravity field and away from the gold field, she'll have a longer life."

Dad said: "We'll think it over and let you know in a few days."

"Well, don't wait too long, there are parents of other girls who'd be happy to have them take Ju'lette's place." While they were leaving, I quickly ran back to my room so Mom and Dad wouldn't know I had been listening.

I've heard about Companions. Sort of a cross between a concubine and bodyguard. Could be fun. Chance to see another planet. Getting tired of this place – nothing much to do here anyway. I've had all the boys in my class – even fooled around with some of the girls. Just fun and games – no one any better than another and no one really interesting.

And I've heard that off planet you can actually fly! What a turn-on that could be! Anyway, in a few years Dad will tell me who to marry and then he'll tell me what to do for the rest of my life -- so how different is that from being indentured to a man?

Mom and Dad called me into the living room. They told me about the Selection Committee's visit and I played innocent. Told me they had decided that I would attend the Academy. Told me how hard the Academy would be, that not everyone who started was able to graduate. Said they'd be real proud of me if I became a Companion, even though they'd miss me when I left (yeah, sure). Of course, they didn't ask me if I wanted to do it, just as they wouldn't have asked if I wanted to marry the man they chose.



Been too busy getting used to this Academy to write. The first day was chaos. Someone yells to get your uniforms here and another shouts to get your books over

there. Everyone's in a hurry and everyone shouts -- no one seems to talk normally. What's their problem?

What passes for food here has to be eaten at a ridiculous pace -- and they make you answer stupid questions while eating. Someone sloshed the milk while passing it around and she got yelled at like she committed a crime.

My roommate Hil'dee seems OK. She's real enthusiastic and goes on and on about flying around when we go off planet. She has a fantastic figure (but so do all the girls) and we even had a chance to play around with each other to ease the sexual tension. That's the only problem here -- no boys to play with. Rumor has it that soon the male instructors will give us some very interesting lessons!

Started Martial Arts training. They really work us hard, but I like it. Its fun figuring out how to overpower another girl. Once I even took down an instructor -- that really felt great.

One of the upper class girls, Ka'reneve, is really giving me a hard time. Yells at me for the slightest infraction. She's slightly shorter than most of us and a little lighter, but they say she makes up for it with her intelligence and determination. She's certainly tops when it comes to intimidation. The only good part is that next year I get to intimidate the new girls!

This ethics class is a real drag. They teach us how a Companion has to act. I'll have to obey my master and act subservient to him -- well Mom acts that way to Dad! But it'll be hard acting that way towards a man I know could easily break in half. They keep on saying that I have to protect and serve him in any way that he commands -- that it's his

interests that I will serve, not Velor's. But here comes the good part – if there's an attack by the Aureans, then I'm supposed to protect everyone threatened by the Aureans.

So the interesting part is learning how to take out the Aureans. Well, the actual combat training will come later, when we go to Erin'lah. Now we have to memorize a whole lot of stuff. Have to be able to recognize any Aurean ship. Have to know where everything important is on every ship – bridge, navigation system, propulsion system, main computer, life support. Have to know how to get into the ship and disable each system.

Every day after class, an upper class girl quizzes me on what I've had to memorize. They shout questions and demand instantaneous answers and when I don't answer fast enough they heap sarcasm and derision on me. Drives me crazy — it's so hard to think when they do that! Ka'reneve is the worst. Why does she have it in for me?

Maybe she really doesn't hate me. Maybe there's a good reason for the shouting and derision. Today, Ka'reneve yelled at me: "How will you be able to carry out an attack in the middle of a battle with the Aureans if you can't even think straight when I'm simply shouting at you?" Gave me something to think about.

I've been working harder lately. The new evaluations by the upper class girls were posted and I'm near the top of the class! Ka'reneve even told me I'm doing a good job!

It's sometimes hard to figure out why we have to learn the non-combat stuff. We were told that we'd have to quickly fit into a new culture, so we'd have to learn about the culture quickly and not do anything that would offend people. Many men would also like their Companion to be able to talk intelligently when they were alone and also when he

was showing her off to his friends. So we're given books to read from a culture and then we have to talk to male instructors playing the role of a master and his friends. We also have to read books about different, unrelated subjects — we're told that the object is to get used to learning things quickly.

We're also taught that we'll have to learn how to act towards the other women in the master's life — wives, mothers... And it will be different in different cultures. So we're learning about different cultures just to get the idea that there's so much diversity in the way people live and think. I find these ideas very interesting. These are the kind of things that ordinary Velorian girls would never learn. And the strange customs in some places! Most other cultures even have a nudity taboo! And girls are usually expected to be virgins when they get married! If a Velorian girl were a virgin past the age of 15 people would think there was something wrong with her. What's so great about virginity? It just means that no boy wanted you.

I'm home now for Winter Holiday. Mom and Dad actually seemed glad to see me. I guess they get tired of just having Jor'lun for company. It feels good to get out of my uniform and into my own clothes and not have to worry about being perfectly groomed.

I went over to Car'lee's house and the other girls from my class were there. They asked me all about the Academy. They were incredulous when I told them about some of the cultures we studied. And they thought the martial arts were exciting. They said that I looked more muscular — must be all the exercise we get.

Then the boys came over and the party began. When they heard about my martial arts training, they wanted me to demonstrate.

"Bet I could take you down", Jo'dan boasted.

"Oh, I don't think so", I countered.

Then everybody began to egg us on. So we started to square off.

“Hey, Jo’shoo”, Car’lee yelled. “Don’t you think we could observe their moves better if they were naked?”

“Great idea”, he replied. Then everyone started yelling “Strip, strip”. So we did.

I played around a bit and then used some of the moves I learned and floored him easily, pinning him to the ground with my whole body.

“No fair”, he pouted. “You used trickery.”

“We’re not taught to fight fair. We’re taught to fight to win,” I proudly answered.

Anyway, while I was lying on top of him, he got a lovely hard-on. So we found ourselves a cozy spot and started to screw. Skietra, it felt good! When we came up for air, I noticed that everyone else had paired off and were going at it. We spent the rest of the evening joking and changing partners. Now, that’s what I call a party!

Back at the Academy now. Spent the evening talking to Hil’dee about our experiences back home. We agreed that while the girls back home had life much easier, their lives seemed dull. All they were doing was learning to be good wives and mothers. And because the boys were away at school, they didn’t get to have fun with them very often.

We’re learning about art and music now. We were told that after we were indentured, we would be taught the language and culture by deepteach. But art and music can’t be taught that way. So we’re being taught how to look at different styles of art and to listen to different kinds of music.

Its amazing how varied art and music can be. I look at some paintings and have no idea what they are until the instructor explains it. Then I look at a painting in the same style and I understand it! Then there are some paintings of scenes that are so beautiful it

takes my breath away. And the music! Some of it is so strange, and others actually hurt my head. But some pieces are so beautiful I want to cry.

Other cultures seem much richer in art and music than Velor. I asked one of my instructors why she thought that was. She said that maybe its because we were cut off from our heritage when we were brought to Velor, while other people took their culture with them.

6. Initiation

“Aleeza, tell me about your first time,” Ju’lette said. Reflecting on her own experience had made her all the more curious about the Scalantrans.

“Like many things in our lives, there is an Initiation Ceremony, which takes place when we are at the age of sexual maturity. There is always an equal number of boys and girls from the group being initiated. I was initiated with three other girls and four boys.

“The girls were ritually bathed and perfumed with special aromatic oils. Our hair was specially arranged and we were dressed in lovely diaphanous garments of our favorite colors which covered us from shoulder to knees. The boys were also specially prepared.

“When we were brought into the ceremony room, where adults of the group greeted us, we met our initiators. These had to be from another group. We were only told their personal names, for we would never see them again, except accidentally. The initiators are always young adults, chosen not only for their sexual expertise but for their sensitivity and ability to put people at their ease.

“We were each taken to a special room. This was the only time that it would be necessary to be alone, so that we would not be embarrassed and would concentrate only on the one initiating us. The room was specially decorated, with soft colors and a

large, comfortable bedding area. There was specially prepared food that we could take whenever desired, for we would be together there, alone, for three days.”

“Did you do just start having sex and continue for three days?” Ju’lette asked. She did not think the Scalantrans would have the same stamina as Velorians.

“Oh, no. I told you, the initiators are chosen for their ability to make people feel at ease. First Lucjan told me about himself, so I would not feel that I was with a stranger. Then he asked me about myself, what music I loved, what my aspirations were. Later, he programmed the music system to play my favorite music. After a short time, I felt very comfortable with him and relaxed. He said things to make me laugh and forget my feelings of embarrassment. Of course, we had had classroom instructions on sex, but it wasn’t a lab course.

“Gradually, things became more intimate and then he started to make love to me. He went slowly and always made sure I was ready for the next step. When it finally happened it was wonderful.

“We spent the rest of the time talking, laughing, eating, sleeping, making love. He taught me the way to indicate to a man that I wanted him and how to reject an invitation without causing offense. And he taught me how to please a man.

“And at the end of the three days we were taken to a common room and the initiators bade us farewell. Then we were left alone for a day. I looked at Neetan who I had always liked and signaled to him. He enthusiastically signaled back and we found a spot to practice what we had learned. I assume the others did likewise, although I wasn’t paying attention to them! Later, we gathered together and talked, and laughed and were happy. Then we found other partners.”

“What happened when it was over?”

“We heard a gentle reminder that the time for the Initiation Ceremony would soon be over. We freshened up and were all dressed when Elonza came for us. We returned to

the ceremony room where the adults were again gathered. They then formally said good-bye to us. This was the only sad part of our initiation, for we were no longer part of our birth-group.

“We were escorted to a nearby youth group. We would go to school and stay with various youth groups until we were accepted into our adult mate-group. But living in a youth group is a wonderful time in our lives, and I will tell you about another time.”

7. Final Exam

Aleeza's story reminded Ju'lette of her own final exam. Like the rest of her training, she had faithfully recorded it in her diary.

I stood naked in the room assigned to me, waiting for the man who would administer my final exam, to prove that it would be safe for a frail to have sex with me and still be satisfied. I was told that this year's Lottery Boys were from Andros and that the Boy assigned to me was named Tassos.

He came in and stared at me. “You are a goddess, and I am here to worship you.”

All I could think was: What's with this guy? Has he been in space too long? I thought he just came here to fuck me.

He closed the door and took his clothes off. I took a good look at him. He was so different from Velorian men. He was shorter, compact and muscular. His hair was a deep, reddish brown and flowed to his shoulders in luxuriant waves. His eyes were a brilliant shade of green. His body hair was dark and curly.

He came over and started stroking my hair. “I've never seen such hair – so soft and silky and golden.”

Then he kissed me and then kissed each breast, sucking on my nipples. “Never have I seen such magnificent breasts.”

He took me over to the bed and we lay down together. He started caressing my inner thighs, but then abruptly changed position, mounted and entered me. I was concentrating too hard on my muscle control to really enjoy myself, but he quickly came with a loud shout.

We tried many different positions. I showed him those that I had learned which required strength and dexterity on my part but were safest for him. As time went on, the necessary muscle control came more naturally and I was able to really enjoy myself.

After a while, he said to me: “Now I can do what I wanted to do earlier, but was too excited.”

Again, he kissed me and sucked my nipples. I told him he didn’t have to be gentle — he could bite me hard and it wouldn’t hurt, it would only feel good. Then his head went between my legs. He licked and nibbled and sucked me till I thought I’d go mad. His tongue went all around and inside me. Oh, it was wonderful!

While he rested, we talked. He told me about Andros and what a beautiful planet it was. He told me about Kalla. That she was famous for her beauty and her goodness. How she helped the people of Andros. How all the men there fantasized about her and thought she was like a goddess. And then I understood his outburst when he first came into the room. He told me about his family and their business and the things he wanted to accomplish when he returned. He told me about the books and music that he loved. He told me that he had known many girls, but none were like me.

And I talked to him about myself. I told him the things I liked about our training — learning about other cultures and their music and their art. I told him that I hoped to be indentured to an important man who was respected and contributed to his society. And I thought that it would be wonderful to achieve even a fraction of what Kalla has.

At one point, we looked out the window and saw how beautiful it was outside. We decided to go out. By this time, we were comfortable with each other, so we took each other's hands and walked outside naked. We walked around a while and found a spot beneath some trees, where we could see the sky through the leaves. He lay down and I straddled him, impaling myself on his erection. The breeze caressed our bodies as I happily fucked him. As night fell, we went inside and fell asleep in each other's arms.

When we woke in the morning, we lazily started caressing each other, the memories of yesterday fresh in our minds. Now, it no longer felt like a final exam, as we came together naturally, again and again.

Near the end, I said to him: "You've been so good, I want to do something for you. Lie down on your back." I kissed and caressed him all over until he was erect and pointing to the ceiling. I took him into my mouth and greedily, but carefully, sucked him until his jism squirted into my mouth like a geyser. I swallowed it like a woman dying of thirst. I looked up at him, smiling and said: "Hmmm, delicious."

He lifted me up to him, kissed me and held me to him and said to me in a low, husky voice: "There's no woman like you, Ju'lette. You are truly a goddess. I will never forget you."

"Nor I you, Tassos", I responded. And I thought that I would be happy, if the man to whom I was indentured was like Tassos and treated me as he did.

If she had known what actually lay in store for her on Nova Iberia, she might have deserted then and there -- jumped ship at the first stop, any stop.

8. Reflections on Evil Days

Would that my memories of Nova Iberia could be as joyful as those of Velor and Tassos, Ju'lette thought as she perused her diary again in the privacy of her quarters.

The Scalantrans, she knew, had suffered far worse than anything that could have been inflicted by her evil master. Yet she couldn't have known that at the time, couldn't have known that Alfonso would betray his own world and his own people to the Aureans.

Yet the truth was plain to see. She shouldn't have been surprised by the depths to which he could sink. Her only comfort now was to know that he had reaped what he had sown, and at the very hands of those he had abused.

I have finally gathered the materials to once again keep a diary. It wasn't easy since Nova Iberia is so much more primitive than Velor. I think that if I write in my diary, it will help me keep sane.

When I first met Don Alfonso and discussed indenture with him through the Scalantran translator, I thought that he was an important man in his society and wanted to do things for his people. I also thought that he was handsome and virile and would appreciate all of my talents.

I was wrong on both counts. He isn't as important as he made himself out to be and he has no desire to help anyone but himself. Yes, I can't deny that he has handsome features, but when I got to know his character, his face and form lost all appeal to me. He only seems to regard me as a trophy to be shown off to his friends.

As for sex He seemed to quickly lose interest in normal sex. He never showed me the slightest tenderness and when he took me it was quick and without passion. So quick that I hardly received any pleasure. After a while he started to beat me and use sharp instruments to try to pierce my flesh. It seemed to enrage him when he couldn't damage me or make me feel pain. Why did he purchase someone purported to be invulnerable if he wanted someone to harm? I think he would have liked it if I showed

fear or pain — but I refuse to pretend and give him that satisfaction. I've noticed that he doesn't get an erection until he's vented his anger and tried to humiliate me.

Don Alfonso seems to love to humiliate me in any way he can. After the indenture was agreed to, the Scalantrans put me through a course in the Nova Iberian language and customs through Deepteach. But although I learned the language through Deepteach, I needed practice to get the pronunciation right. Every time I make the slightest mistake he makes fun of me.

Oh, I sometimes wish my hearing wasn't so good! Don Alfonso is with Almeida now and I can hear her screams. It's so pathetic. She begs his forgiveness for imagined wrongdoing. She swears she'll be a better wife, do whatever he wants her to do. But no matter what she says he beats her and she screams and moans in agony and I've seen the bruises on her body. Then it's quiet for a moment. And then he starts to fuck her savagely and she starts to scream and moan again — in pain, not in ecstasy as a woman would with a normal, tender man.

I wish I could help her. But what can I do? If I intervened there is nothing he could do to harm me — but I'm sure it would be worse for Almeida. He could even kill her! I thank Skietra that at least he doesn't harm his daughter Ysabel. He just ignores her, which is probably the best thing for her.

I've heard that Don Alfonso frequents a brothel in town. There's a young whore there who's tall for a Nova Iberian and has blonde hair and blue eyes. He is said to beat her and call her Ju'lette before fucking her. That "Ju'lette" gives him the satisfaction of screaming in pain. The madam would like to keep him away — even turn him in to the authorities, but he is too powerful.

I find it hard to know how to behave around Almeida. I don't see her too often. I'm not invited to eat with the family and of course, I don't attend any of their religious services. But sometimes I see her when we're both walking in the courtyard. I don't let her know that I can hear her and Don Alfonso at night — it would surely embarrass her. And I try to avoid looking at her bruises.

Ysabel is a lovely little girl. You can tell how Almeida adores her — she acts so tenderly towards her.

Almeida acts polite when we meet. But we have nothing to talk about except such commonplaces as the weather. I wonder what she thinks of me? I don't think she's really jealous since she obviously has no love for Don Alfonso. Perhaps she's even glad I'm around — as someone who can siphon off some of Don Alfonso's anger.

Today I went to a local Festival with Don Alfonso. Almeida stayed home — I think she was ashamed for people to see her bruises. He had me wear a tight fitting and low cut dress and then paraded me possessively in front of any man we met.

I had heard that there was another Companion on Nova Iberia and that she'd been here for 30 years. Her name is Liz'bet and she's indentured to an important merchant named Gabriel Molina. I saw her there with him. They were standing close together and seemed to be talking intimately and smiled often at each other.

At one point, she looked up, saw me and smiled. She started walking towards me. I didn't want her talking to me near Don Alfonso. In a quiet voice that I knew she could hear, I asked her in Velorian to meet me at a nearby grove of trees and I went over there when Don Alfonso wasn't looking.

We exchanged traditional Velorian greetings. Oh, it was good talking to someone in my native language! She asked me about Velor and I brought her up to date on some of the more interesting recent events. I started talking to her about the Companions'

Academy, but I heard Don Alfonso calling me and I knew I had to cut the pleasant meeting short.

Liz'bet seemed relaxed and content. What a contrast to my life with Don Alfonso!

Talking to Liz'bet yesterday, brought home to me my loneliness. I knew I would be in a strange culture without other Velorians. (I was surprised to find another Companion here.) But I thought that I would be able to become part of that culture and even make a contribution to it. But that hasn't happened. Don Alfonso keeps me isolated. Luckily, he doesn't realize how good my hearing is. He doesn't realize that I overhear him talking to his retainers, family and servants. I can hear the servants and retainers talking among themselves. I even hear the services in their private chapel. But I am not involved in the life that goes on around me. He doesn't give me any meaningful work nor allow me to mix with the others.

What good was all my training at the Academy? He doesn't want to engage me in sparkling conversation. He just wants to show me off as a trophy and when I talk he leads his friends in laughing at my accent.

He's not even interested in my sexual skills. He just abuses me and then it's a quick fuck.

Don Alfonso has told me that his rival, Don Ricardo, is getting too powerful. He wants me to rough up some of Don Ricardo's retainers and have them give him the message that the same will happen to him if he doesn't stop challenging Don Alfonso's authority. I refused. Don Alfonso screamed at me that I must obey him, it's in the Standard Contract. I told him that I must obey him only when the purpose is to protect him or his family. "I need you to do this to protect my power," he screamed.

"If they physically threaten you I will protect you, but only then," I replied. This really infuriated him, but he couldn't figure out a way to make me obey him.

Yesterday, I overheard Juanita, a young widow, talking to Don Alfonso. She told him that she lived with her 2 very young children and that her husband had been killed in his service. She was 6 months pregnant and unable to cut wood for the winter. Could he please have one of his men help her? He roughly told her that all of his men were busy and would help her when they had time and that she should feel grateful that he allowed her to stay in the cottage.

Without letting her see me, I followed her home to see where she lived. At night, I heard Don Alfonso in Almeida's room and knew he wouldn't need me. I opened my window and flew over to her cottage. I easily cut, split and stacked the firewood outside her door. She will have a wonderful surprise in the morning and not know who did it — I'm sure Don Alfonso would not be pleased if he knew what I did.

Today, both Don Alfonso and Señor Molina were attending a horse fair and I was able to talk to Liz'bet again. I told her about the escalating war with the Aureans and the training we had received at the Companions' Academy to defend against them.

"There's something you must know", I said to her. "There's been an extension to the rules governing Companions' behavior. Our duty is still to serve the interests of our masters, not the interests of Velor. However, there is one exception. If the Aureans attack our planet, it becomes our duty to defend the planet's population and destroy the attacking Aureans."

I was walking in the woods and heard two of Don Alfonso's men talking, far enough away so they couldn't see me.

"My wife's a good Christian woman and an excellent mother", the first one said. "But in bed ... She just lies there without moving or showing the least interest, except for me to get it over with. When I'm finished she'll say 'I'll pray to the Virgin that you've given me a son' and as soon as she knows she's pregnant she'll ban me from her bed."

"Thank God there are brothels", the other one said.

"You're damn right," the first replied. "Now Ju'lette ... I'll bet she could set a bed on fire. I'd give anything to have her."

"If she were mine, I'd treat her like a queen."

"She'd be the queen of my bed!"

Oh, I would go to either of them. Skietra, I'd take on both of them! But I know that if any man so much as touched me Don Alfonso would kill him.

Today, Don Alfonso had me run with the bulls at the corrida. I teased them and let them attack me with their horns. It didn't hurt me and I tried not to hurt them. A bull tossed me in the air and one of the knights impaled me on his lance. It felt good inside me and I squirmed to feel it more. I made sure Don Alfonso knew that I was enjoying it and saw the look of contempt on his face. I don't care — I wanted him to know that a piece of steel could give me more pleasure than his pathetic prick!

That was as far as she'd gotten. There had been more important things than writing after that day — after the Enemy came to the gates.

9. Councils, Counsels

It was their first day on Meetpoint 17. Jonjerem walked through the pedestrian tube to the meeting hall, happily looking forward to seeing his old friend Dobaron from the

ship *Star Seeker*, who had been chosen by the other ships to take the lead in negotiations.

“Jonjerem, it is good to see you. We have heard of the horrible fate of your ship and the timely rescue by the two Velorian Companions,” Dobaron said. “You know you have my deepest sympathy and we of the *Star Seeker* will do all in our power to help you. Were you able to save your children?”

“Yes,” Jonjerem responded. “They all survived. They were very well trained. Our distrust of the Aureans led us to stage drills quite often.”

Each child in the older cohort had located his assigned younger cohort child and had swiftly taken him to their assigned hiding place. They had been trained to quickly locate the almost invisible design that served as a keypad and to key in the code to open the otherwise undetectable door. The adults had put them through long term drills so the older children knew how to entertain and take care of the younger ones.

“Of course, it would have been to no avail if the Companions hadn’t come when they did,” Jonjerem added.

“Well, Jonjerem, what are the *Far Wanderer’s* plans?” Dobaron asked.

“It is our hope to replenish our crew to the extent that we can properly carry out both our trade and social functions. There are five ships here besides the *Far Wanderer* and all of our mate groups are represented in those ships. We should be able to make deals to obtain the crew that we need.

“Of course, it will not be possible to balance both the crew requirements and the mate-group requirements, but we will do the best we can. In two years, it will be time for our older cohort to leave the ship and we’ll start a new cohort and ingather new mate group members when we drop them at the Alpha Meetpoint.”

“You can count on me to use my contacts to help you recruit new crew members. Let’s go back to your ship. We’ll go over your crew and mate-group roster and confirm

your requirements. We'll call up the rosters from the other ships and we'll find the people you need. Then I'll contact the ships' leaders and ask them to approach those that we've chosen and, hopefully — once arrangements can be made with their councils — they'll be willing to join the *Far Wanderer*."

Dobaron was soft spoken. He made things sound easy. They were not. It was one thing for the Scalantrans to trade a few people between ships; it had been done for centuries. It was quite another to build almost an entire ship's complement from scratch, with the other ships being left well short of full strength, with mate-group relationships on those other ships being disrupted in the bargain. An element of restrained bluntness now entered his conversation.

"We of the *Star Seeker* and the other ships want to do everything we can to help," he said now. "But the ship's councils may be reluctant to part with the kind of specialists that you require, for we too require them. Furthermore, there are mate-group considerations, as you well know. And you have none to trade. It will be a difficult matter to find terms acceptable to the others in such a circumstance. I think you know what I mean."

The two friends went on network to call up the records of the *Star Seeker* and the other ships, and pored over them to find people who might fill the needed positions, yet might be spared by their present ships. In cases where none were available, they sought those who could easily be trained to do the assigned tasks. They knew their work was just beginning; there were still many gaps — and the other ships' councils had to be formally approached and proposals for just compensation entertained.

After a while, Jonjerem turned to his friend and raised a matter that he had avoided until now: "There is one more position that needs to be filled. I want you to find someone to be trained to be the ship's historian."

"But that's *your* job," Dobaron protested.

Jonjerem looked into Dobaran's eyes, letting him see the sadness within. "I'm tired, old friend. I've been in space too long ... seen too much."

Dobaron placed his hand on his friend's arm, gave it a squeeze with his thumbs. "No one should ever have to see what you have seen."

"That can't be helped. Anyway, it's time for me to retire. When we get to Andros, I will make arrangements for transport to a planet where my mate-group is thriving."

He read the expression of Dobaran's face.

"Oh, don't worry. I won't go crazy from boredom. I'm planning on taking a set of records and notes with me. I'll be working on the history of the *Far Wanderer* that I've always wanted to write. It's a proud history, and it should be better known.

"And I've been thinking about writing some texts for children so they'll learn about our history and traditions and will learn to be wary of the Aureans. I helped save our own children, and if I can help save those on other ships, it may yet give me surcease."

10. Renewal and Rebirth

The crew members had been selected and the necessary training completed.

Negotiations had been long and hard. The *Star Seeker* and the other ships had been torn between loyalty to their own and compassion for the survivors of the *Far Wanderer*. The Scalantrans, moreover, were traders by nature and long tradition, and the pitifully few remnants of the *Far Wanderer's* original complement had neither people nor goods to offer in return.

In the end, the other ships were able to spare enough of their complements to meet the bare minimum requirements of the *Far Wanderer*. For recompense they asked only access to the sealed logs of that ship. Such a small thing, and yet a great thing; for all

knew that sealed logs held the kind of trade secrets that Scalantran traders jealously guarded from one another.

It was a gamble, they reckoned, but a safe gamble: they knew the value of their own secrets, and fully expected the same of the *Far Wanderer's*. In that, they were far from disappointed. It was a bitter thing for the proud ship to give up the hard-won knowledge of the next worlds scheduled for opening to trade by the departure of the Seeders, and the coordinates of a rare nexus wormhole offering access to half a dozen systems instead of just one. But it had to be done.

And now it was done. Now, all that was necessary before the *Far Wanderer* could depart was the formal welcoming of the newcomers into the ship's society. First, each mate-group would have a welcoming ceremony; and the next day the newcomers would take the oath of loyalty to the *Far Wanderer*.

Since all the mate-groups would need a ceremony room, some used the rooms on other ships and some used those on Meetpoint 17. Remba was the lucky mate-group which was randomly selected to use the one on the ship.

Some of the older people volunteered to look after the children. The rest prepared themselves for the ceremony. They bathed and perfumed themselves before entering the ceremony room. But the most important part of their preparation was mental. They did their best to slough off the trauma of the past and concentrate on the joyful occasion of welcoming the newcomers.

They were, of course, naked. Previously, a first-welcomer had been chosen for each newcomer. This was a member of the opposite sex near the age of the newcomer. An octagonal table was set up with an ornamental cloth on which were beautifully decorated goblets filled with an exotic drink whose recipe was known only to Remba mate-group of the *Far Wanderer*. The first-welcomers arrayed themselves to the left and right of the

table and the rest of the group stood behind it. In the front of the table was a member designated as the master of ceremonies.

The newcomers entered the room. Each one was introduced by name and previous ship. The position was not important today – that would be taken care of tomorrow. After each was introduced, the assigned first-welcomer went to the table and picked up a goblet and went over to the newcomer, saying: “On behalf of the *Far Wanderer*, I welcome you. May your life here be as sweet as this drink. May your nights with us be as exotic as its flavors.” The newcomer then drank from the goblet and went to a specially prepared area. When all the newcomers had been thus greeted, the rest of the members paired off and surrounded them.

Aleeza was glad to be welcoming Densan. It was her happy duty to make his first night with the *Far Wanderer* mate-group as memorable as possible. It was traditional that, at least at the beginning, the newcomer would be mostly the responder, not the initiator. Aleeza could tell from Densan’s cries of delight that the sexual skills that she had learned over the years were working their magic. Later, Densan turned the tables and showed Aleeza his appreciation.

The ceremony was a great success. The joyous noise of the couples surrounding them made the newcomers feel at home. And at the end, a feeling of peace and renewal fell over the group and once again they were able to feel optimistic about the future.

The next day, the entire adult complement gathered in the council room. Jonjerem introduced each newcomer giving full name, previous ship, previous position and new position. If the newcomer was old enough to have any special accomplishments, these were announced. Then, they all took the oath of loyalty to the *Far Wanderer*, pledging themselves to the welfare of the ship as a whole.

Now all was in order and the *Far Wanderer* could prepare to depart. Soon she would be on her way to Andros. The pre-arranged signal for Ju'lette to return was given. All went about their jobs and the newcomers showed that they had been well trained.

11. Waiting, Reaching, Seeking

Ju'lette gazed out at the bleak landscape of Meetpoint 17. She had struck a deal with the Scalantrans of the *Far Wanderer*. While they were on the Meetpoint planet, she was to go off by herself, away from the area where the Scalantran ships congregated.



These arrangements were quite agreeable to her. She had grown tired of the sound and smells of the Scalantrans. Not that they were offensive – she had gotten used to them on her trip to Nova Iberia. But after Nova Iberia, it was difficult to be once more cooped up with the alienness of the Scalantrans. At least, on the trip to Nova Iberia, she had had the company of the other Companions and the sound of her native tongue had helped insulate her from that of the Scalantran language. And there was the nightly sound of their lovemaking permeating the ship....

She had removed her clothes to feel the cool, invigorating air on her skin. Feeling the need to stretch her muscles after her long confinement on the ship, she began to run across the barren landscape. And after a while, she leapt into the air and started to fly. Enjoying her freedom, she executed acrobatic maneuvers. She knew that she would never be able to explain the sheer eroticism of flying naked, feeling the air caressing every part of her body.

She flew over red sandstone which over the eons had been sculpted by the wind into magnificent formations. Then she came to a small lake and dove in. The water was icy but gave her a wonderful, tingly feeling. She swam underwater, enjoying the rippling of the water. She surfaced, dove, swam, turning over and over, her legs kicking wide.

When she had enough, she climbed out of the water and sat by the lake, her knees drawn up and her arms around them. She was glad to be on this planet, enjoying her solitude. She remembered the story told to her by Marpolom, the Travel Captain who had championed her in her effort to get back to Velor.

After the council had decided to go to Meetpoint 17, I rose to address them:

“Ju’lette has requested transportation to Velor.”

“How can we do that when we have just decided that it is imperative that we stop at Meetpoint 17?” Mican asked.

“You know that no one, absolutely no one, but Scalantrans may go to a Meetpoint. We must keep the location of the Meetpoint planets absolutely secret,” Petran said.

“But you all know how much we owe Ju’lette,” I countered. “Without her and Liz’bet we’d all be dead. And if they hadn’t acted so swiftly, our children would have starved in their hiding places. And it is known throughout this, and other galaxies, that Scalantrans always, yes always, pay their debts.”

Mican, who was serving as head of navigation, said: "We can make sure she doesn't know where Meetpoint 17 actually is. We can even take a roundabout way, doubling back through wormholes. She'll have no way of knowing how far we've even gone"

"But how about when we get there?" Tuvem asked. "Members of other ships won't understand our debt to her and won't like the idea of her being there."

"Look", I said. "It's not that difficult. I'll simply tell her that she has to keep away from the settlement while we're there. We'll arrange a signal to let her know when we're ready to leave."

The days wore on.

Ju'lette put her time alone to good use. She thought not only of the life she had led on Nova Iberia, but tried to imagine what her life could be in the future. The thought of going to Andros and perhaps seeing Tassos again intrigued her. She was pretty certain that by the time he had reached home, Tassos would have started thinking of her as a beautiful memory and relegated her to the past.

He'd probably married by now and become the proud father of at least one child. If so, she vowed that if she saw him she would keep the meeting on a friendly but impersonal level. She knew that his culture valued fidelity and she would do nothing to harm his marriage.

But if, for some reason, he was still unattached ... Well, that was quite a different story. Then, she would give in to her desire to be held in his arms again. She had only good memories of him. And while sex with the Velorian boys seemed as if they were just having a good time with the nearest girl, Tassos seemed to be making love *to her*.

She couldn't stop thinking about him, even as she continued her explorations of this stark yet beautiful world, with its cratered plains, ice caps and glaciers, ridges and rifts. The Scalantrans had chosen it, they told her, because neither the Galen nor the Diaboli

had ever shown any interest in it for their settlements. She knew practically nothing of the Diaboli, but she wondered if the Galen had found beauty here.

Ju'lette was on one of her flights when she heard the signal to return to the ship. She quickly changed direction and headed back. Since the Scalantrans had no idea how fast she could fly, she took her time, enjoying the scenery for the last time.

As she neared the settlement, she heard the gay shouts of a group of children playing. But then she heard a rumbling sound. She saw that a boulder had broken loose from the cliff above the children's heads and was starting to fall towards them. She could see the astonished looks on the faces of the children farther away as they watched her quickly swoop down, catch the boulder and carry it off to a safe place.

By now, Ju'lette had learned to distinguish Scalantrans and could tell from their ages that they were not from the *Far Wanderer*. One of the older children ran up to her and thanked her and she was glad that she had studied the Scalantran language during the trip.

Then some adult Scalantrans, presumably the adults from these children's ship, came over and were told how Ju'lette had saved them. One of them went over to Ju'lette: "We have heard about you and how you saved the *Far Wanderer*. Now you have saved our children. We thank you — from the depths of our beings."

Ju'lette smiled. She had not understood every word said to her, but 'thank you' was a phrase that she knew. It was a simple phrase, but it warmed her heart.

Then another Scalantran came over and said: "Before, we were still uncomfortable about having you here. But now, we are so grateful that you were here. Perhaps in the future, Scalantrans and Velorians can work together."

Perhaps, Ju'lette thought. Perhaps it will be possible. What a team we could make!

Shortly after Ju'lette returned to the ship, she learned the details of the agreement among the Scalantrans that had led to her recall. The next port of call was Andros, headquarters of the regional Factor General — not her ultimate destination, but in the right direction, at least.

Follow the continuing adventures of Ju'lette in Part Two:

<http://brightempire.com/Homecoming-2.pdf>