

THE STARS MY WITNESS

My alarm jangled me awake and my body longed for more sleep. We'd fallen asleep later than usual. There had been an air of farewell in our lovemaking, even though nothing had been said. I turned over and found that Frank had already left. He'd probably now be greeting his wife and their two year old son. I'd been hearing rumors that she was ready to break off with her lover and try for a second child. Time for Frank to play the dutiful husband.

I threw on my robe, poked around the floor until each foot got into the correct slipper and headed to the women's room. I hoped the line for the 'freshers wasn't too long. I wanted to have enough time for a decent breakfast before reporting for duty. Docking was scheduled for late morning and with my position as ship's legal and political officer there was no telling when I'd have a chance for another real meal.

I used the toilet and got into line for the 'fresher. I really wasn't in any mood to talk so I pretended to be even sleepier than I actually was. But there was one person I couldn't avoid.

"Jan darling," I heard, as warm, possessive arms gave me a big hug.

"Good morning, Mom," I dutifully replied.

"You look worn out, dear. Maybe if you had a man of your own instead of borrowing other women's husbands you'd get a little more rest as well as regular sex."

It was just a variation on our usual conversation. Mom had the urge for a grandchild she could see regularly. My brother Tom had gotten married three

years ago and transferred to his wife's ship. Mom had only seen her granddaughter the two times *The Solar Flare* had the luck to be at the same station as Tom's ship for a few days. Otherwise she had to be content with vids.

"Sorry Mom, talk to you later." I hung up my robe and quickly entered the 'fresher, wishing I had time to linger. I returned to my room, put on my uniform and dabbed on a little makeup, trying to hide the circles under my eyes.

The energy level in the cafeteria was even higher than it usually is on docking day. We would be at Sinclair Station for a full thirty for some much needed maintenance. And most of the personnel who weren't involved in the maintenance would be able to enjoy the shops and restaurants on the Station and even take a trip down to Sinclair's World.

I ate my breakfast with my PersComp in front of me, going over the protocols for docking at Sinclair. I freshened up and reported to the Bridge for duty. Captain Lucille Pickett was, of course, already there.

Captain Pickett was a fine looking woman of around sixty. The only evidence of her age was the gray streaks in her hair. She told people that she refused to waste time coloring her hair – she'd rather spend the time in the gym keeping her athletic figure. Besides, she said that her husband liked her the way she was. She and her husband Rick, who was the *Flare's* chief financial officer, were still very close, unlike my parents and most couples who drifted apart after the children were grown.

I sat down next to the Captain and we talked for a few minutes until she had to give her attention to the final approach and docking. Like myself and my

mother, Lucille Pickett had been born on *The Solar Flare*, so in a way, we were like family. I had done my work well, and there were no problems with customs when we docked.

I was glad to be sitting at a small table in a bar with soft lights and soft music. My drink was a Starlight Sizzle, exotic tasting with only a mild punch. I was finally starting to relax after a long, tiring day. I hadn't even been able to eat a peaceful dinner but had had a working dinner with Captain Pickett. And all we could eat was salad and cold meats which we assembled ourselves so that the kitchen staff could relax on the station.

I was sitting there with my eyes closed when I heard a deep masculine voice. "Excuse me, but didn't you go to Tarantor U?"

I looked up to see a tall slender man with a thick thatch of black hair and deep brown eyes. "Yes, I graduated eight years ago. I'm Jan Randall. Would you like to join me?"

"Thanks. I'm Seth Dalton. I was two years behind you."

"I'm sorry, I don't remember you."

"Oh, I wouldn't expect you to. I was rather awkward and shy then. Quiet, and kept mostly to myself."

"Well, you seem to have outgrown your shyness."

He looked at my drink and told the waitress that he'd like the same and seeing that my drink was almost gone he ordered another one for me.

“I really was kind of funny looking then. It took me a while to grow into my height.”

“You sure aren’t funny looking now.”

He took a few sips of his drink before continuing. “In my senior year, I met a girl who was almost as lanky and awkward and shy as I was. Let’s just say that we found a time honored way to give each other confidence.”

“So, you like tall women?”, I said, ever conscious of the fact that I wasn’t even medium height.

“Oh, I like tall women ... and short women, and medium sized women.”

I laughed, getting the message.

“Did you get in today on *The Solar Flare*?” he continued.

“Right. I’m her legal and political officer. I haven’t seen any other merchanter ships. Are you a Sinclair Stationer?”

“Oh no, I’m also a merchanter. I’m a science officer on *The Wanderlust*. They dropped me off ten days ago. I’m here to collect botanical specimens from Sinclair’s World and see if we can find any with commercial value. There’s been rumors of some very exotic smelling flowers which I’m trying to find.”

“Sounds interesting. On my ship, we owe ten years service for university. How about on yours?”

“The same. Luckily they’ve given me interesting assignments in addition to the usual hydroponics duty.”

We reminisced about Tarantor U. It turned out that there were several professors whom we both had. And we had both enjoyed the plays by the drama department and the concerts by the music department.

The time had passed so quickly that I was surprised when he noted the time and asked me if I had any plans for tomorrow's dinner. I was happy to tell him that I had none.

"How about I meet you at the ramp to your ship at 1800 hours? I know some nice restaurants and maybe we can even go to a club for music and dancing afterwards."

"Sounds great. I'll see you then."

I was finished with my meetings by 1600 hours so I had plenty of time to prepare for my date. It was a long time since I'd had a real date as opposed to an assignation. I was really looking forward to seeing Seth again. I'd found our time together last night so enjoyable. Our conversation seemed to flow from one thing to another, finding areas of common interest.

We ate in a small restaurant. The food was good and unpretentious and although it rapidly filled up, it wasn't noisy and the atmosphere was conducive to conversation. It was hard to believe that we'd just met the previous evening. There was nothing flirtatious in his manner, yet I was always conscious of his masculinity.

After dinner, we walked hand in hand to a club which featured a live band. We sat close together at a small, round table with a real candle in the center.

After taking a few sips of our drinks we got up to dance. When we sat down, we hugged and kissed lightly.

Towards the end of the evening, the music became slow and sensual. He held me close when we danced and I rested my head on his shoulder. He pulled me close against his body and I delighted in the feeling of my breasts pressing into his chest. And I felt his arousal hardening against me. I looked up at him and saw the desire in his eyes. He bent his head down and gave me a long, deep kiss. I returned the kiss, savoring the taste of his lips and tongue.

When we returned to the table, he took both my hands and looked into my eyes. "I think you know how much I want to make love to you. But I want it to be special. I want to get a room in a good hotel tomorrow. I'd like a room in the best hotel, but I can't afford it. Would that be okay with you?"

"It would be more than okay, Seth. It would be wonderful."

"Shall I meet you again at 1800 hours?"

"Can we make it 1700?"

"Yeah." He laughed and then said: "I can manage that. And before I forget to ask, do I need to get anything?"

"No, my shots are up to date."

I needed all my discipline to concentrate at work. I got a couple of strange looks when my mind seemed to wander. You'd think that instead of being an experienced woman who had slept with a man a couple of days ago, I was a

young girl about to lose my virginity – something that had happened a very long time ago.

I returned to my room at 1530 hours, showered, changed into a skirt and blouse and packed an overnight bag with business clothes for tomorrow.

When Seth appeared, I could tell that he was as happy to see me as I was to see him. He slung my overnight bag over one shoulder and put his other arm around me, saying: “I got us a room at the Galactic Inn. I’ve already checked in and dropped my bag off.”

The hotel was nice without being fancy. Seth put his palm on our door’s scanner and we stepped inside. As soon as he had put my bag down and locked the door we were in each others arms, kissing and caressing.

I pulled my blouse over my head. I hadn’t bothered to wear a bra, just put one in my bag. His head went from my lips to my breasts, nibbling and sucking each one. I slipped out of my skirt. His head continued downward and he pulled down my scanty panties.

“Ah,” he said. “As I hoped. A real redhead.”

He scooped me up in his arms and deposited me on the bed. I watched as he quickly stripped, enjoying the sight of his long, lean body. There was black, curly hair on his chest, but he wasn’t overly hirsute.

We kissed again, our naked bodies pressed together, our hands caressing and exploring. Then his head went between my legs. His lips and tongue and the sight of his jet black hair mixed with my red curls drove me wild. Just as I was about to beg him to take me, I felt him plunge deep inside me. He paused a

second, looking deep into my eyes, before starting to move. I wrapped my arms and legs around him and we moved together, first slowly and then more rapidly until we joyously climaxed.

We lay side by side, still holding each other, enjoying the afterglow, gently stroking and kissing. After a while Seth said: “Now that we’ve satisfied that hunger, how about some food?”

He went over to the RoomServer and brought up the menu. “Hey, they have real beef here. It says the cattle are raised down on Sinclair’s World. Let’s treat ourselves to some steaks.”

“Great, make mine medium.”

“What do you want for dessert?”

“Anything, as long as it’s chocolate.”

“Oh, a chocoholic. I’ve heard chocolate is an aphrodisiac, but I don’t think we need one. And I’ll order us a small bottle of red wine.”

I sat on his lap and we cuddled until the RoomServer beeped about fifteen minutes later. We opened the unit’s door and took out our dinners, drinks, napkins and tableware. The room temperature was comfortable and we were able to sit at the table and eat dinner without having to put any clothes on. And it seemed perfectly natural to be sitting there with Seth, eating dinner naked, having just made wonderful love.

Before I could start on my lovely chocolate cake, Seth said: “Let’s save that for later. Right now I want *you* for dessert.” He pushed back from the table and I could see that he was ready for more — of me that is. Without further ado, I

went over and straddled him. I took a bite of my cake and gave him a delicious chocolate kiss. And then I proceeded to give him me for dessert.

We ate our desserts, finished our wine and put everything in the RoomServer's disposal. Then we went back to bed. We talked and made love into the wee hours of the morning. Finally, we agreed that we'd better get some sleep. I made sure to set the alarm.

It was so wonderful to be together in the morning that it took all our discipline to get out of bed. Having a 'fresher for just the two of us was a real advantage. We decided to keep the room, but I insisted on sharing the expenses. After dressing, we used the RoomServer for a quick breakfast. On the way out, we made the arrangements to keep the room and registered my palm print.

Despite a less than full night's sleep, I was happy and mentally sharp. Which was a good thing since the contract negotiations had reached a critical point. I returned to my room after work, did some laundry, and packed a suitcase with several days worth of clothes and met Seth at our hotel room.

We fell into a routine of eating dinner at various restaurants and then returning to the hotel. We would listen to music and watch videos; a good way to learn each others tastes. And of course we made love, exploring each others tastes in that also. Never had I felt so free, so comfortable, with a lover.

One evening, at dinner, Seth said: "I have to make another trip down planet. I'm going to be collecting specimens in a very exotic location. I'm allowed one assistant to help collect and carry out the specimens. Would you like to join my little expedition?"

“I’d love to. My work’ll take two more days. Will that be good?”

“Fine. Can you pilot a hopper?”

“It’s been a while, but I got my license on Tarantor.”

“It’ll come back to you. I’ll fly. You can just be my backup. I’ll buy our Shuttle tickets and reserve a hopper tomorrow.”

When we got back to the room, we went over the needed supplies. He already had a tent and other equipment from his previous trip. The climate where we were going was warm, so I would only need to get some sturdy pants and hiking boots. Seth had a spare backpack I could use. There was a store on the Station that was used by people who wanted to hike on Sinclair’s World and it was always open. We would buy food at the planetary terminal.

We would be staying on planet two nights. We discussed everything we would need and I entered the lists into my PersComp and then sent them to Seth’s. The evening before the trip, we gathered all the equipment in our room, checked them off against our lists and packed. We brought all our equipment, except our personal belongings, to the terminal, so that we would only have to carry our backpacks in the morning.

Because of our busy schedule, we treated ourselves to a RoomServer dinner again. Seth couldn’t stop talking about what he hoped to find. He gave me general instructions about how to collect the plants but assured me that he would give me more detailed instructions when the time came. As for myself, I was just excited to be going to a planet; I hadn’t had time to do so since graduating from college.

After breakfast, we finished packing the personal belongings we would not take with us and then we checked out of the hotel. They were kind enough to allow us to keep our luggage in storage so we wouldn't have to pay for the room while we were away.

Once more, we took the short walk to the passenger terminal. While waiting to board, I saw several families from the *Flare*. I greeted them and introduced Seth. The adults were having trouble keeping the children under control, the younger ones excited by their first trip to a planet.

We settled into our seats and had an uneventful two hour trip to the surface. When we arrived at the terminal, we waited impatiently for our luggage and equipment. When it was all there, we put it on a cart and went over to the Econohopper Rental desk. Seth went over the contract and added me as the second pilot. We were able to leave our belongings there while we purchased food for our stay. We could catch the van to the hopper terminal in an hour.

We had a quick lunch and then bought enough supplies for two breakfasts, one lunch and two dinners. When we reached the hopper terminal, Seth made sure we had the correct coordinates for our destination and got a weather update. The hopper we rented was a utilitarian model. Our main concern was room for our equipment and adequate fuel. It would get us there in comfort, if not in style.

We stowed our equipment, went through the hopper's check list, entered our destination's coordinates and took off. The flight was mostly automatic so we

were able to relax and enjoy the view. By the time we landed in the clearing, which was as close as we could get to our destination, it was early evening.

It didn't take us long to set up the tent, since Seth had done it before. We spread a blanket in front of the tent. I got out two of the packaged dinners and pulled the heating tabs. Five minutes later they were ready and we ate them sitting side by side. By the time we had finished eating and cleaned up, night had fallen.

We lay down on the blanket and gazed up at the stars, which thickly filled the sky. Although I often went to the ship's observatory to view the starfield, viewing the stars from a planet, far from civilization, was a completely different experience. And I was glad that I was among those privileged to travel between those stars.

Seth turned to me and started to undress me, kissing each area of skin as it was exposed. I returned the favor, and we made slow, languorous love beneath those stars. We lay quietly together for a short time and then went into the tent to sleep. We knew that we would have to get up early in the morning.

We woke shortly after dawn and had a quick breakfast. We packed water, lunch, tools and empty collection bags in our backpacks and stowed everything else in the hopper. Seth had been told that the walk should take two to two and a half hours. I was glad that I had kept in shape. The terrain wasn't difficult, just a slight incline in places. The problem was the gravity. It was ten percent higher than Earth normal. We were careful to stop often, rest a few minutes and drink some water.

Finally we reached our destination. It was a clearing at the foot of a cliff. A creek fed by a lovely waterfall ran through it. I was glad to be able to take off my backpack and stretch my shoulders. I sat and looked around the clearing. Although I had seen plants from many worlds in the botanical gardens on Tarantor, never had I seen plant life in such abundance and variety.

The walk had made us hungry, so we had our lunch before starting to work. While eating, Seth pointed out the plants that he wanted to collect.

Before collecting any specimens, we holographed them in situ. Some grew along the creek, some in the open part of the clearing and some under the trees. Seth not only wanted to study the plants, but he had to know where they grew so he could cultivate them.

Then we gently removed them, keeping enough soil around the roots, labeled them and put them into the collection bags. We worked slowly and carefully, but were cognizant of the fact that we had to leave enough time to get back before dark.

When we were finished, I felt hot and sweaty. The water in the creek looked awfully good. I stripped and headed for the creek.

“Be careful,” Seth yelled.

“I will. Come join me.”

I walked carefully into the creek. The water came up to my breasts. Seth came in after me. The cool, refreshing water felt wonderful. Seth got out first and watched me as I walked towards him, a big grin on his face.

I looked him up and down. “Hmm ... I don’t think you’ll be able to walk very far in that condition. I think you need some medical treatment. Lie down.”

He found a level stretch of ground and lay down on his back. I went over and impaled myself on him. Slowly, I began the treatment, enjoying the sounds of his moans and the look of ecstasy on his face. After a while, he gasped out: “I think the treatment needs to be applied more vigorously.”

I laughed: “Your wish is my command”. After a few moments, I threw my head back and gave full voice to my passion, taking advantage of our isolation. His cry of joy joined mine. We both laughed when startled birds in a nearby tree took flight.

Seth pulled down my head for a quick kiss. “Sorry to have to say this, my darling, but we really have to get going.”

I reluctantly got up and we both dressed. We put the remnants of our lunch in the bottom of our backpacks and the water bottles in the outside pockets. We carefully filled the backpacks with the full collection bags and slung the bags that didn’t fit in across our shoulders.

With a quick glance to make sure that we had left nothing behind, we started our trek back to the hopper. In a way it was easier than the trip to the clearing since it was all downhill. But our backpacks were full and it had been a long day. We were glad when we finally sighted the hopper.

We carefully stowed the specimens in the hopper and ate our much needed dinner before setting up the tent. We once again drank in the beauty of the starry sky before entering the tent and falling into a deep sleep.

We caught a Shuttle and got back to the station in late afternoon. After putting the specimens in the storage area Seth had rented we went back to the Galactic Inn. The clerk greeted us cordially: "Good afternoon Ms. Randall, Mr. Dalton. Good to have you back. I'm afraid I can't give you the same room but I have one just as good. Oh Ms. Randall, you received a message today. I'll transfer it to your room com."

As soon as we got into the room and put down our suitcases, I activated the com and heard Captain Pickett's voice: "Hello Janice. I hope you had a pleasant trip. Please report to me at 0900 tomorrow."

"Wonder what she wants," I said to Seth.

"No use worrying about it, let's enjoy the evening," he replied.

We luxuriated in the 'fresher, which really felt good after roughing it, and then went out to dinner. I felt much closer to Seth after spending nearly three full days together and working with him down on Sinclair's World.

When I entered Captain Pickett's office the next morning, she greeted me and spent a few minutes asking me about the trip. Then she got down to business.

"There's an important piece of legislation coming up before the Assembly. It's important for *The Solar Flare* and all the merchanters. We've decided to send you to Tarantor to testify on behalf of the merchanters."

I was excited by the challenge and by the thought of going to Tarantor again. "When do I leave?"

“There’s a direct flight day after tomorrow. You’re already booked. You have a lot of work to do before leaving. I’ve called a meeting of some department heads to give you an overview.”

I was kept busy all day. After the meeting led by Captain Pickett, I met with her husband Rick. He went over the financial aspects of the pending legislation in great detail and downloaded many documents, replete with statistics, to my PersComp. Then I met with Andrea Carney who was in charge of trade. She gave me information about the current trade situation and the absolute necessity of being able to open new trade routes without government interference. And she also downloaded documents galore brimming with statistics.

In the late afternoon I was able to have a brief meeting with my mother, who as usual, was effusive. “Jan darling, I’m thrilled at your new assignment. What a coup! And word’s gotten round that you have a luscious new lover. Tell me all about him.”

To my surprise, I enjoyed telling Mom about Seth. And it obviously showed, since she said: “I have a feeling this is more than just a casual romance. He sounds to me like a keeper.”

I knew she was right. I knew that I had never before felt this way about a man.

As soon as I got back to our room, I told Seth about the assignment. He responded enthusiastically: “That’s great Jan. I envy you, going back to Tarantor.”

“The only bad part is that it’s cutting short our time together.”

“Can’t be helped. Let’s just make the most of the time we have left.”

And we did that. We had dinner in the room, talked, and made wonderful love.

I went back to the *Flare* early the next morning and got to work getting together my personal belongings for the trip. Mom helped me pick out the clothes I would need. She declared that I didn’t have anything suitable to wear when I testified before the Assembly. “You can’t wear your ship’s uniform because you’re representing all the merchanters.” Together, we went to a clothing store and spent more than I normally would on a pale blue business suit and matching shoes.

When we returned to the ship, I was informed that *The Star Seeker* was in and her captain wanted me to meet with several of her officers. The meeting was held in one of our conference rooms, with some of our own officers also attending. After that I had another meeting with Captain Pickett where she gave me final instructions and wished me luck.

Dad came to my room and we talked while I was doing my final packing. Then he helped me with my luggage and walked me to the hotel where he gave me a farewell hug. Seth came to the lobby and I introduced him to Dad. Mom would be jealous when she found that out.

“Let’s take holos of each other,” said Seth, as soon as we got to the room. We posed for each other and then he said: “Now I want some pictures of you naked.”

At first, I felt strange posing naked. But then I got into the spirit and it was fun and erotic. I gave him poses which were bold, playful and sultry. I posed standing, sitting and lying on the bed. Then I said: "OK, turn about is fair play." And I had the fun of taking pictures of him naked, and by then fully aroused.

Then I put down the camera and showed him just how much the holography session had excited me.

After dinner we talked, made love and repeated the cycle deep into the night. Finally, exhausted, we fell asleep in each other's arms.

I awoke in the morning to feel Seth pressing against my back, his hands gently caressing and squeezing my breasts. "Once more before you leave," he whispered. One hand went between my legs, lovingly stroking me. Then he entered me and I once more thrilled to the feeling of having him inside me. We moved together as one, for by now we knew each other's rhythms. We both wanted to go slowly, wanted it to last. Finally we could stand it no longer and intensified the movement until we both exploded.

"Oh Jan, Jan," he shouted. "I love you."

I turned to him and softly said: "I love you, Seth." And I knew, deep inside me that it was true. That he was the man for me. What I didn't know was where this love would lead. But for the moment, I was content just to know that it existed.

I pressed my palm into the reader, forcing myself not to look back as Seth left the terminal after a long farewell kiss. It took me a minute to realize that the attendant had finished processing me and told me I could board.

A steward met me and showed me to my cabin. Although it was quite small, having just enough room for a single bed, desk, chair, dresser, closet and lavatory, it was all mine. I was very glad that the *Flare* had spent the extra money so that I could have my own cabin. I had enough work to do without having to negotiate sharing a room with a stranger.

I had unpacked what I would need for the trip and stowed my suitcases under the bed when I heard the announcement: "Departure in ten minutes. All who want to watch from the observation room, please go there now." I was feeling rather tired from the lack of sleep the last two nights, though frankly I would not have given them up for anything, so I decided to watch the departure on my room display.

It had been a long time since I had bothered to watch a departure. It had been a long time since the place we were leaving held any memories for me. I got comfortable on the bed and switched on the display. It showed a countdown to departure. Then the message "undocked" appeared and we slowly began moving away from Sinclair Station. I thought of Seth and wondered if he was watching me depart.

Then I could see an arc of the station and after a while the whole station was shown with Sinclair's World in the background. Memories of being with Seth on planet, working with him, making love with him, flooded my mind. Finally, when the ball of Sinclair's turned into a tiny dot, I turned off the display and fell into a deep sleep.

I was awakened by the klaxon announcing five minutes to Jump. I turned over, but four minutes later came the second klaxon and the announcement that the first Jump would take place in one minute. I was so used to Jumps that I hardly noticed the usual symptoms of slight dizziness and a feeling of disorientation as the ship took us from here to ... there.

I had heard stories about inexperienced travelers' reaction to Jumps. Some were so nervous before their first Jump that they requested tranquilizers. Some actually threw up. But most got through it without too much trauma and felt both disappointed that it wasn't as big an ordeal as anticipated and glad that it was over and they hadn't made fools of themselves.

I had slept through lunch and had eaten only a small breakfast, so I was ravenous by dinnertime. I was one of the first people into the dining room. The tables were all large, big enough for about a dozen people. I sat down at one, wishing it would fill up so the waiter could take our orders. All my table mates were friendly. The family sitting next to me had never been to Tarantor and had many questions to ask me. I enjoyed the simple dinner and the company.

I returned to my cabin after dinner and tried to do some work. I was feeling restless and had a hard time settling down. After a little while I gave up and went to the lounge for a drink.

I was sitting at a table, enjoying my drink, when I heard a deep masculine voice asking me if he could join me. I looked up to see a tall, well built, very handsome man who appeared to be in his mid-forties. He had blonde hair, blue eyes and was impeccably groomed. His clothes looked expensive and fit him

perfectly. I looked him up and down and felt ... absolutely nothing. But I politely said: "Of course."

He sat down and introduced himself. He ordered a drink and I politely refused when he wanted to order me another one, even though my glass was still half-full. Then he started telling me about himself ... in great detail. He owned a business on a planet I had never heard of, but which he assured me was very important, as was his company. He was going to Tarantor to do ... I can't remember what, but I'm sure it was very important.

At some point in his monologue he remembered to ask me about myself. I perfunctorily told him that I was a merchant and going to Tarantor on business. When he had finished his drink he said: "Why don't we continue this in my cabin?"

There was a time when I would have thought: *Why the hell not?* He was obviously a very experienced man and might even be a very skillful lover. But I had absolutely no interest in finding out. He left me absolutely cold. What was skillful, passionless sex compared to what I had experienced with Seth?

"No thanks. I'm not interested," I responded.

"Don't you like men?" he asked, seemingly astonished that a woman had rejected him.

"Oh, I like men all right. But right now, there's only one man that I want and you're not him." I bade him good night and went back to my cabin.

I got down to work right after breakfast the next morning. I had a lot of reading to do before I could start writing my presentation. I got into the routine of

working after breakfast and then taking a break to exercise in the gym before lunch. After lunch I would go back to work until it was time to freshen up for dinner.

When I had digested all the material I had been given to read, I struggled with writing the talk. I knew that I had to present the salient facts, including some statistics to give the talk authority. But I also knew that I had to keep it interesting, or their attention would wander.

I was getting to know my fellow passengers at meal time and sometimes spent the evenings with my dinner companions. Many of them, especially youngsters, wanted to know what it was like to be a merchanter. I was happy to tell them about our lives. We like to have outsiders join the ship from time to time and passengers on an interstellar flight are good candidates. An infusion of new blood is a good thing, both for their genes and ideas. I told them that each of our ships is like a small town needing people with many different skills. Some of the parents didn't want their children to listen to me, knowing that if they were accepted on a merchanter ship they would probably never see them again.

And I listened to them tell me about their home planets, some of which I had heard of but many were new to me. They were all long settled worlds, since those living on planets in the pioneering stage of development didn't have the time or resources for interstellar travel. Each of them had a deep attachment to their home world and were happy to tell me what they felt was unique about it, whether it was the climate or the terrain or the culture. Each assured me that I would enjoy a visit.

And at night, before going to sleep, I would take out my holoviewer and look at the pictures I had taken of Seth and a feeling of warmth would come over me. I especially liked the one where he was sitting on the bed, naked, beckoning me to join him.

By the time we made our final jump, I had finished my writing and was practicing giving the talk, recording it and listening to it. I was grateful that I had been required to take a course in public speaking at Tarantor U.

I had forgotten how busy and crowded Tarantor Station was. Sinclair was a hub, but Tarantor was *the* hub. Finally, all the processing was finished and I was in the main part of the passenger terminal and went over to the hotel reservation desk.

I'd been given a list of hotels in Tarantor City which were within an acceptable price range. The second hotel that the agent tried had an appropriate single room available. I completed the reservation, grabbed my bags and went to the Tarantor City shuttle.

During the shuttle flight, I thought about my first trip to Tarantor. I had been barely seventeen and I will now admit that I was scared. I had traveled throughout a large portion of the known galaxy but always with the *Flare's* large extended family. I was alone for the first time, about to go to an unknown planet where I knew absolutely no one. When I landed at Tarantor Terminal, I had been met by a university hopper and taken to the campus in Seldonopolis. Gradually, I

had been drawn into the life of the university, acquiring an ever expanding circle of friends, so that by the time I graduated it had become my second home.

Now, when we landed, it was like coming home. When I stepped out onto the surface, I felt a lightness that was only partially due to a gravity of ninety-five percent normal. I was met by the hotel van. It was only a short ride to the hotel, which was on the outskirts of Tarantor City.

The hotel was unpretentious and my room modest, but still large compared to the cabin on the trip to Tarantor. The best part of the room was the window. I was on the tenth floor and had a view of the parkland outside the city.

I contacted my old history professor, Bob Schwartz, right after breakfast the next morning. Not only was he my favorite professor, but one of the best liked professors on campus. He was happy to hear from me, but wouldn't have sufficient time for a visit until the next day.

I decided to go into the heart of Tarantor City and play tourist for the day. Capital of the planet, capital of the Federation, it has been said that there never has been such a city as this.

The city had been laid out with an eye towards functionality and esthetics. There were buildings of metal and glass gracefully reaching skyward. And others, having no need for such grandeur, hugged the ground. Lakes and parkland interspersed the buildings. Government buildings formed the core. Then there were museums, theaters and restaurants, and outdoor venues for concerts and festivals, giving the people who lived in and around the city and the tourists a rich cultural experience.

I spent the day walking around, reacquainting myself with the city. It was a glorious summer day. Various small parks were dedicated to the flora of one particular planet. I enjoyed them, but it was a pale reflection of my experience on Sinclair's World.

In the evening, I attended an outdoor concert featuring the Tarantor Global Symphony. They played music from many planets, covering a vast period of time, going back as far as pre-spacefaring Earth. The evening was wonderful, almost perfect – perfection would have been Seth at my side.

The next morning, I ate an early breakfast and took a public hopper for the one-hour flight to Seldonopolis. When I arrived at the campus, I truly had a feeling of coming home.

What a contrast to Tarantor City! Here, the tallest building was the ten story administration building. Most were low buildings of the native stone; beautiful stone of a lovely bluish gray. Because of its size, the university was divided into many colleges, named for famous schools and educators and giants in their fields back on old Earth. There was Cambridge and Oxford and Harvard and Sorbonne and Heidelberg and a school of early education named Montessori, among others.

There were winding paths meandering between the buildings as well as flitters for longer journeys within the campus. There were small grassy areas with benches, planted with native trees and bushes for easy maintenance. Here, as opposed to Tarantor City, the object was not to impress but to give the students and faculty a place to sit quietly, think, talk and study.

When I got to his office, Prof. Schwartz greeted me warmly. He was now in his mid-fifties and a rather non-descript man: medium height, medium build, brown hair and brown eyes. Since I had seen him, streaks of gray had been added to his hair and it had become a little thinner while he had put on a couple of pounds.

“Good to see you too, Prof. Schwartz.”

“Now Janice, we no longer have to be so formal, I’m no longer your professor. Please call me Bob.”

I did so, but felt awkward. Although friendly to students, he had never crossed the line of professor-student relationships, especially with women students. He was not only liked because of his friendliness, but because he was such a good teacher. He had made history, which I had never cared for before, come alive and had gotten his students to think.

We spoke casually for a while. I told him about some of the more interesting places I had visited in *The Solar Flare’s* voyages. When I related some interesting facts about the history of some of the stations and planets, he asked me to pause while he made some notes on his PersComp.

Then we got down to the reason for my visit. I asked him to listen to my talk and critique it. He was happy to oblige. He stopped me from time to time and suggested a change of phrasing or pointed out some facts that should be emphasized more. He also suggested a few historical facts that would bolster my arguments.

I thanked him for his help. Then I said: “Do you remember a student, two years behind me, named Seth Dalton? He’s tall and was lanky then.”

He thought a moment and then said: “I believe so. A rather quiet young man. Didn’t talk much, but when did make a contribution to a discussion it was always worth listening to.”

“Yes, that sounds like Seth.”

“Is your relationship to him a romantic one?”

“Very much so. Although we’ve only known each other a short time.”

“Then I imagine he’s no longer shy.”

“No. He has a quiet confidence... in all things.”

“Good. I hope things work out for you. Good luck on your presentation and your future.”

The next morning, I went back into Tarantor City to present my credentials and get the documents I would need to enter the committee room as a representative of the merchanters. I was told that they would be ready for me the day after tomorrow. I hung around the city for a while and then went back to my hotel.

When I got there, I found vids from the ship and from Seth. Right before arriving at Tarantor, I had made vids to send back to Captain Pickett, my parents and of course Seth. I told Captain Pickett of my progress on my talk and sent trivialities to my parents. I told Seth about the trip, but the important part was telling him that I loved him and hoped that we could find some way to be together.

These vids, of course, were sent before they received mine. I read the captain's first; I always like to leave the best for last. She gave me some very last minute advice and told me that unless the hearing was really delayed, I should meet the ship at Ramsey's Station.

Then I settled down to enjoy Seth's vid. The best part was the ending, where he told me how much he loved me and how much he wanted to be with me.

I spent the rest of the time before the hearing making the changes Prof. Schwartz had suggested and polishing my presentation. I had no trouble booking a flight to Ramsey's Station. It's a fairly big station although not as big as Sinclair. There would be two days between the hearing and the flight.

My presentation was scheduled for late morning so I wouldn't have to rush. I was glad that I was only speaking in a committee room. I took my seat in the audience and awaited my turn. Naturally, things ran behind schedule and I wasn't called until after the lunch break.

Finally, my time came. I was introduced and took the witness seat. I took a deep breath and began the presentation. After a few minutes, my nervousness disappeared. I could tell that they were really listening to me. Afterward, the chairman thanked me and asked a question. I was able to answer him without difficulty. Then there were a few more questions and it was all over. It was both a relief and a letdown.

I treated myself to a good dinner in a small restaurant before returning to the hotel. I relaxed and enjoyed the city. I spent some time in the extensive markets

which featured products from all over the Federation. We had been taught that no matter what our position, we should always keep an eye out for new products.

The ship to Ramsey's wasn't as large the one I had taken to Tarantor. Moreover, it wasn't a direct flight. There was a half-day layover at a small station. The flight was long and boring. I almost wished I had a roommate to argue with. I spent part of the time writing up a report. The passengers weren't that interesting; they seemed to be suffering from after vacation letdown, perhaps thinking about the prosaic lives they were returning to. Frankly, I just wanted to get home.

When I finally disembarked at Ramsey's Station, I was happy to hear that *The Solar Flare* had already arrived. I went directly to the ship. After signing in, I asked after the Captain and was told that she was off the ship, as was almost everyone. She had left a message that I should report to her first thing the next morning. I was glad that my report was in order so that I could relax.

I went directly to my room, unpacked and decided to put off doing laundry until tomorrow. I set up my holoviewer with a picture of Seth. Otherwise, the room was the same as I left it. It was good to be home.

There was about an hour before I could get whatever cold dinner was available, so I went to the lounge to relax. I sat on one of the comfortable sofas and closed my eyes. After a few moments I heard a deep masculine voice. "Excuse me, but didn't you go to Tarantor U?"

I jumped up, yelled: "Seth!" and threw my arms around him. We stood there, hugging and kissing until I could finally let go of him long enough to say: "What are you doing here?"

He laughed: 'I'm glad to see you too. Let's sit down and I'll tell you all about it." We sat together on the sofa, his arm around me, and he began his story.

"After you left Sinclair I couldn't stop thinking about you ... about us. Couldn't concentrate. Wasn't getting a damn bit of work done. So I put my considerable intellect to the task of figuring out how we could be together without having to wait four more years."

He gave me a quick kiss and then continued. "After a few days, I hatched a plan. It was brilliantly devious. I counted on the rivalry between ships to be my ally.

"I started hanging out in bars frequented by merchanters and pretending to drink too much. I let out that I had secrets certain people would love to know. Finally, I let it be wheedled out of me that I had found a plant with tremendous commercial value.

"I did this a few times and the rumor started to spread until it worked its way up the *Flare's* chain of command. The upshot is that *The Solar Flare* bought my commitment from *The Wanderlust* and here I am!

I showed him how delighted I was by grabbing him and giving him a long kiss.

Then he got serious. "I love you Jan. Will you marry me?"

“Oh Seth. I want that more than anything. But you know that I can’t marry a shipmate, even if you just joined the crew. We take exogamy very seriously on *The Flare*.”

“We take it seriously on *The Wanderlust* too. So I made sure there’d be no problem. It just so happens that my Aunt Rose is the legal officer on *The Wanderlust*. I let her know the situation. She’s a real romantic. Anyway, she gave Captain Pickett a song and dance about not wanting to give me up completely, wanting me to be able to return if things didn’t work out, etc. etc. So I’m actually being rented on a monthly basis, which means that I’m still officially a member of *Wanderlust’s* crew.”

We waited until *The Solar Flare* was in her natural element: in deep space, between star systems, untethered to any planet. Captain Pickett, Seth and my closest friends and family were already in the observatory, but the ceremony would be broadcast to the entire ship. Seth stood to the right of the Captain who had her back to the viewport.

I walked in between my parents. My gown was a very pale shade of the green which was a tradition on my ship and symbolized our memory of the green hills of Earth. The neckline was low and the bodice hugged my body while the diaphanous skirt flowed gently to my ankles.

The Captain, my parents and Seth, wore their ship’s dress uniform; Seth’s deep blue contrasting with the silver of the *Flare’s*. My mother was proud of the fact that she could still wear the uniform she got twenty-five years ago. And she

still looked great in it, the v-neck proudly showing off her cleavage and the long straight skirt emphasizing her still sleek body. And the Captain looked equally good. I hoped I would look that good at their age.

I walked away from my parents and went over to Seth. We faced each other, but could still see the starfield. I looked up at him and we both smiled.

I took a deep breath and began: "With this token, I pledge you my heart, my mind and my body." I picked up the shears, bent my head and cut a lock of hair. I gently placed it in the small box that had been carved from a tree whose distant ancestor had sunk its roots deep into the soil of Earth. I thrilled to hear Seth speak the same words and see him cut a lock of his thick hair. We then swirled the locks together, the deep black of his hair mingling with my red, symbolizing the mixing of our DNA in our hoped for children.

A thrill ran through my body as he took my hands and said his vows. "Janice, as the stars are my witness, I will love and cherish you all the days of my life. And I would have you for my wedded wife."

I answered him in as clear a voice as possible. "Seth, as the stars are my witness, I will love and cherish you all the days of my life. And I would have you for my wedded husband."

"Janice and Seth," Captain Pickett said, "having declared your vows to each other, you are now husband and wife. May your lives together be long, happy and fruitful.

"Jan, I have had the pleasure of watching you grow from a spirited and mischievous little girl into a lovely young woman who is a great asset to this ship.

Seth, I have heard many good things about you, and you must be a fine man if Jan has chosen you for her husband. I look forward to having you as a member of my crew.

“Now, let us all adjourn to the lounge where the entire crew, except those on duty of course, have been invited to a reception in honor of the bride and groom.”

And then, with a twinkle in her eye, she added: “Enjoy yourselves but make sure you’re fit for duty tomorrow.”

At the reception, and often in the ensuing years, I was told by many people that never had they seen such a happy couple.