

TOLERANCE STATION or TRUE CONFESSIONS FROM SPACE

by Shelby Vick

"Farms around Tolerance Station are extremely fertile and produce unparalleled crops. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the farmers."

-- Oglethorpe's Universal Encyclopedia, Volume Eight

I just wanted to be loved.

As I lay on my hospital bed, sometimes darkly unconscious, sometimes jolted awake by a new wave of pain, sometimes hovering between the numb relief brought on by pain medication and the fearful relief of blackness, I remembered.

. . . The spacer I fell in love with when I was sixteen. He was blondly handsome, and I saw an air of mystery about him because he went into the depths of space.

"Wonder and death around me all the time," he told me. His name was Lew Krant, and he was an Associate Astrogator. We were sitting on a bench in the park where we had met. There was one real tree, several plants in pots, and a glassed-in square protected a plot of real grass. The spring air was almost clean. "Things few men have ever seen," the spacer went on, "and things no man should ever see." He held me tight while he said that, and I was sure I felt love pouring from him. His eyes looked at the skies, but I knew he was totally aware of me.

"What's your name, pretty thing?" he asked.

Why did he have to ask that?

". . . Jefferson Rook," I answered, nearly whispering.

"Jeff -- " he started. "But. . . . But you're a girl!"

"Yes." There was bitterness in my voice. "But my father wanted a boy. He wouldn't change it."

". . . Oh. Well, it doesn't matter. You are who you are, whatever label you carry. You're beautiful, Jefferson Rook."

It felt good. So good that, when he asked me to go away into space with him, I agreed in a heartbeat. "Wait here," I told him. "I want to get a few things from home."

"Very few things," he said. "Not much room in my cabin."

“‘Very few things’ is all that I have,” I said, a touch of bitterness in my voice. Then, remembering we were going off together, my spirits lightened. “I’ll be right back,” I said. He kissed me, and I turned to go home. The kiss was still tingling on my lips; I would definitely be right back.

When I walked in the door, two of my sisters were there. “Well, I see little miss innocent big bra decided to honor us with her presence!”

I blushed, then got mad because I had blushed. It bothered them that I was at the top of my class.

“That’s intolerance,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm.

“What are you talking about?” my older sister said, shock and puzzlement in her defiant voice. In the twentieth century, ‘dis-crimination’ had been the buzzword; anyone guilty of it was considered a social outcast. As discrimination was gotten under control, ‘intolerance’ took its place. No one was to be guilty of that -- not even my sisters.

“Intolerance is not accepting a person or idea or anything else just because of some difference,” I explained. “You’re being intolerant of my achievements. You can’t deny it!”

“But it’s always someone else who is intolerant!” my oldest sister objected. “It’s always someone else!”

“Not this time,” I said. “Just think about it.” That backed them off. I went to my bed, picked up a few things I wanted, and left without any explanation. We were a poor family; they would be better off without me.

Lew smuggled me aboard the freighter that had brought him, keeping me out of sight until the ship drive went on. “After that,” he explained, “it will make no difference. Costs too much to go back.” I stayed quiet during and after takeoff, staying in his quarters, both of us strapped in, until he said, “Did you feel that tingle just then?”

I nodded. I had felt it, and felt just a little sick.

“That’s it,” he said, unstrapping. He smiled when he saw the expression on my face. “Feel like puking?” he asked. I nodded again, afraid to talk. He pulled a small box out from under his bunk, took out a syringe, and pressed it against my arm. Whatever he aired into me worked faster than it takes to tell it. My stomach calmed, and I felt fine. Without prompting, I followed his lead and unstrapped, sitting up. Impulsively, I hugged and kissed him.

“You’re a marvel,” I breathed.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” he said, still holding me. He kissed me again, and his warm hands caressed me. Love washed over me as we returned to bed.

Even when he slapped me, I knew he loved me. The first time was when I met one of his crew members. We talked a while, and then he said we had to go back to his quarters. When he closed the door, he slapped me.

“Don’t ever do that again!” he snapped.

“Wh-what?” I asked, puzzled and hurt. My heart hurt worse than my stinging face.

“You were flirting with him!” he hissed. “Don’t ever forget -- you’re mine!”

He was jealous! I felt better, realizing that. He loved me, or he wouldn’t be jealous. “I didn’t mean to,” I said, softly. “I thought he was your friend, and I was just trying to be nice.” Then I added, “I’m so sorry.”

Slowly, the anger faded from his face. “All right,” he said. “Just don’t let it happen again. None of these bums are friends of mine; I just work with them, that’s all.”

I kissed him. “I’ll remember,” I promised.

The next time . . . the next time he slapped me. . . . But before I could remember, the medicine swallowed me into blackness again.

The pain that brought my hospital bed back into my consciousness also reminded me of the pain from that other slap. He had asked for sex, and I said it was the wrong time of the month.

“That’s your problem!” he said, and slapped me. “I want you now, and that’s that!”

He needed me! How could I have been so selfish? He loved me, and needed me.

I submitted.

But the last time he slapped me was different. “You’re what?” he asked, total disbelief in his voice.

“I’m pregnant,” I said, this time some defiance in my voice. “We’re going to have a baby.”

He slapped me. “You were supposed to take precautions!” he said.

I drew back, putting a hand to my face. “I did!” I protested. “I took the Pill, and I used a diaphragm. But I’m pregnant, anyway. That means God wants us to have a child.”

“The hell it does!” he exclaimed. “It means you’re trying to trap me, that’s what it means! I’ll have a doctor suck that thing out of you in a heartbeat.”

“You will not!” I insisted. “No one is killing our baby!”

The baby was the only thing of his I was going to have. He put me off at the next spaceport. We got off the ship, “To see the place,” he said.

"It doesn't look like much of a place," I said, looking around.

"It's a farming community," the spacer told me, "with the space-port serving as its capitol. A few thousand people live here, scattered over hundreds of miles. Best produce in the galaxy," he went on, trying to sound enthusiastic. "Each farm has at least several hundred acres, each run by one family. Like spokes from a hub, roads led away to the farms. Automated trucks brought produce to the spaceport where it was stored for shipment.

"The spaceport itself is really modern," he continued, "with schools, restaurants, a major hospital, bars and theaters as well as administrative buildings and -- mostly -- huge warehouses that surround the landing pads."

A warehouse was the last thing we looked at together. "Know what your trouble is?" he asked me. We were walking down a hall with high walls, stacks of storage compartments and a few closets.

"What?" I asked, a little concerned. After the argument about the baby, I hadn't been sure how to take anything he said.

"Moradys," he said, then was smugly quiet -- and expectant.

"Moradys?" I asked, not knowing what he wanted. "What's that?"

He shook his head. "Smart a girl as you are, you don't know?" he asked. "Guess that ain't in schoolbooks yet." He chuckled, a self-satisfied look on his face.

"What is it?" I repeated.

"It's you," he said. "Sweet. Innocent. Great in bed." The takeoff horn blasted. "But not that great," he snapped, grabbing me and shoving me into a closet before I could do anything, and propped a chair against the knob. I screamed and pounded on the door, but it did no good.

I never saw him again.

Eventually I remembered a glimpse of something I had seen when he pushed me into the closet. There had been a long strip of metal lying on a shelf at the rear, a strip that reminded me of a metal ruler. I fumbled around and cut my finger on something sharp; the edge of the ruler. Sucking my cut finger, I carefully picked up the metal strip. Yes, it was thin, but thick enough for my purposes.

I had learned a trick back home. When the government van left food for us, my sisters would sometimes push me in the bathroom and put a chair under the knob. They did that so they could have more food. One time a ruler had been left in the bathroom, and it finally occurred to me how to use it to get out. I repeated the trick now, getting down on my hands and knees (it was harder to do in the cramped closet, but I managed) and sliding the ruler under the door until it pushed against a chair. After minutes of maneuvering, I managed to slide the chair back, and it fell. I was free.

But free for what? While I was working at the chair, I had felt the telltale vibration signaling the departure of the ship. I was stranded.

Str-a-n-d-e-d. . . .

“Hello, honey.”

Who -- Who said that? Groggily, I opened my eyes. Through a slowly-clearing haze, I saw a blurred hospital room around me. I moved my head and looked about. There was no one there. Who had . . . ? Then I remembered. It was another time I had awakened, back to my memories of the warehouse. I had cried myself to sleep on the warehouse floor, in utter exhaustion, out of it until a hand touched my shoulder and someone said:

“Hello, honey.”

I looked up, and a man’s face slowly came into focus; an old man’s face; he must have been over forty. There were furrows on his brow, smile lines had left their impression around his eyes and mouth. There was a hump to his nose. It was a craggy face, but friendly. He looked a bit ruffled, and unshaven. He must have just gotten off work.

“Hi,” I said, squeakily, sitting up. I cleared my throat. “Hello,” I said, this time with no sleep in my voice. “Am I in trouble?”

He smiled and sat beside me. “Why should you be in trouble?”

“I . . . I don’t belong here,” I said, nervously.

“You don’t even belong on this planet, honey,” he said, patting me on the shoulder. “But that doesn’t break any laws.”

“Oh . . . that’s good,” I said. Then I looked him in the eyes. “How do you know I don’t belong on this planet?” I asked.

“Don’t take no great smarts to figure that out,” he said. “Just two eyes is all I need.” He said ‘Do’ without the ‘t’, and ‘Jes’ instead of ‘Just’. All his ending ‘t’s were soft or dropped. It sounded strange but comfortable. Something was reassuring about it. . . .My grandfather! I hadn’t seen him since I was six, but I remembered he talked that way. I was reassured.

“You don’t dress like anybody around here,” he went on. “No farmer’s daughter would be wearing clothes like that.” I was wearing metallic jeans that fit tightly, and a sleeveless yellow top that emphasized my breasts. He had liked it. “And,” the man continued, “you ain’t old enough to be working in the port. Besides,” he added, smiling, “while I can’t say I know everybody here, I sure would have noticed a pretty young thing like you.” I smiled, but then he spoiled it. “My name’s Jim,” he said. “What’s yours?”

I looked away, biting my lip. Why did I have to carry such a name?

“It can’t be that bad,” he said gently. “I won’t tell anyone else.”

The secret wasn’t really a secret, anyway. “Jefferson Rook,” I said, defiantly.

“Jeff --” Jim shook his head. “Your father must have hated you.”

“Why decide it was my father?” I asked, curious.

“Because a mother would never do that,” he said. “A mother isn’t likely to want a son that strong. Even if she did, she wouldn’t take it out on a daughter just because she was the wrong sex.”

He was so wise, so perceptive. I nodded, not feeling as bad now that someone understood. “He wanted a boy,” I agreed. “I have three sisters. I tried my best. I was always on the “A” honor roll at school, but he said he expected no less.” My sisters used to chide me about those “A”s I got. “Straight-” “A”s and you don’t know nothing; no smarts at all!” they’d say. “A straight-” “A”s ignoramus! You don’t know about people; you don’t know about life! It’s on the street you learn things, not in school or sitting at home reading all the time.” One of them tossed a magazine at me. It was garishly titled, Street Confessions. “If you’re going to read anything, read one of these.” I never read them, because they were the only things my sisters would read.

“My father,” I started again, but Jim interrupted me.

“Never mind,” he said squeezing my shoulder. “It’s who you are inside that counts.

“But,” he added, “we’ve got to do something. You can’t just live in a warehouse.” He got up. “Come with me,” he said, holding out his hand.

I followed him unquestioningly. He led me outside the warehouse. It was dark, but clear. Two moons were overhead, and countless stars dusted the heavens. The weather was calm and just comfortably cool. Lights glowed from posts. An occasional vehicle went silently by. I went with him quietly past darkened storefronts and to a nearby building. As we went inside, I asked, “Where are we?”

“Home,” he answered.

He led me down a long, low-ceilinged hall to a door with his name on it. He palmed the lock and said, “I might not be here if warehouse closets had palm locks.”

He lifted a questioning eyebrow and I told him what happened.

Putting an arm around me, he said, “Sounds to me like you’re lucky we got knobs on closet doors.”

I stared at him, then realized what he meant. Nodding slowly, I said, “I think you are right.”

We went inside. The indirect lighting revealed a light blue cubicle twice the size of Lew’s quarters. Colorful pictures were scattered about. On the right was a cubicle with a bed with drawers under it and a cabinet beside it; on the left was a cooking unit and a refrigerator. Between the two, on the opposite wall, was a narrow door. “My bath,” Jim said, indicating it. “The luxury of a tub, as well as an ultrasonic shower.”

“More than we had at home,” I said, a touch of bitterness in my voice; not bitter in envy, but bitter in memories.

Jim patted my shoulder. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “That’s all behind you, now. Welcome to Tolerance Station.”

Tolerance! That was a nice name, and certainly in tune with the times. I knew I was going to like here, with Jim. He was so understanding.

In minutes he concocted a nice supper which I put away shamelessly. "I hadn't realized I was so hungry!" I exclaimed, pushing my empty plate away.

"It's been some time since you last ate," he said. "You probably slept a long time, and you hadn't eaten since leaving the ship, I'll bet."

"You're right," I agreed. "But that's enough, thanks. Strangely enough, even after all my sleep, I'm not tired."

"Stress," Jim said, nodding. "About time I went to bed, too. But have you ever taken a tub bath?"

"Goodness, no! We couldn't afford that much water back home, and all the freighter had was ultrasonics."

"Plenty of water here," he said, standing. He held out a hand. "Let's go take a bath."

"Maybe . . . maybe we shouldn't," I said, hesitating. "It might be dangerous. For you, I mean."

Jim stared at me, eyes wide. "What are you talking about?"

"I've been told I have," I paused, not being sure I was doing the right thing, but I didn't want Jim to catch anything. "I've been told I have moradys." I finished quickly.

Jim laughed.

"It's funny?" I asked. "I thought it was something bad!" I didn't know whether to be angry or glad. "What is it?"

"Moradys is government-speak for 'morality dysfunction', or something like that. All it means is that you're sexually active while still being sweet and innocent. Nothing to be worried about at all. Let's take our bath."

It was marvelous, soaking in all that warm water and relaxing. Jim scrubbed my back, and that was wonderful, too. All of this enhanced by my relief that moradys was nothing to worry about. Why did the government even come up with such a designation? 'Dysfunction' meant some kind of disability. Was I wrong with enjoying sex, especially if you weren't wanton about it?

"I can't get over how innocent you are," Jim murmured, as he toweled me dry.

Memories of my sisters washed over me. They were always telling me how innocent I was. "Just a minute!" I said, pulling away. "I didn't come here to be insulted, no matter how nice you are!"

"No, no!" Jim said, holding up a hand to restrain my anger. "That wasn't what I meant at all! I was complimenting you! What I was referring to was the wonder of it all, that, after all you've been through with that spacer, you still retain a wonderful innocent attitude about life, and --" he dropped the towel and put his hands on my bare shoulders, and pulled me forward, so I was close to him "-- your relationships with men. So few girls could stand before me, totally nude, and be so unselfconscious about it -- but

innocent, not flirting or showing yourself off or anything, just . . . just innocent.” He leaned over and kissed me. Then he held me tightly, and kissed me again.

It was nice. But what did he think was so different about me? My parents had so little time for me they never said anything about how I should behave around men, and girls were all I had around me at home. My sisters. But they made ‘innocence’ sound like a bad word.

In school, there were my teachers.

One day my fifth grade teacher, Mr. Fromme, asked me to stay after class. Alone with him, he said, “I’ve been noticing you, Jefferson Rook. I’ve been noticing more than your grades.”

“Yes?” I said, not sure what was going on.

“You are. . . developing. Your figure has filled out, very nicely.” He tilted his head questioningly and said, “Does it bother you if I talk about your figure?” he asked. When I shook my head, he went on to say, “Does it bother you if I say your breasts are full and well-rounded?”

When I said, “No; should it?” he stood up.

“Would you come into my office with me?”

I didn’t know what he was leading up to, but I saw nothing wrong with following him. Inside, after he closed the door, he said, “Would you mind if I . . . admired your breasts?”

“I don’t see why not,” I said. “Do you want me to disrobe?”

He licked his lips. “That would be nice,” he said. Then he added, “Have you done this before?”

I shook my head.

It was interesting, different, and quite enjoyable.

Afterwards, while putting on his trousers, Mr. Fromme said, “I think this should be our little secret, don’t you?”

“If you like,” I replied.

It was a secret that, after that, every male teacher and I kept.

Then there was Lew Krant and, now, Jim. That had been one thing I had liked about Lew; he didn’t like secrets; he didn’t mind that everyone else knew what he and I did in his cabin; bragged about it. I liked that. Still, I didn’t understand what Jim was talking about. But that was all right.

Afterwards, we went to bed.

Everything went fine. No one questioned my presence, and I enjoyed Jim’s hospitality. In a few weeks, he came home to say, “Got a special visitor coming tonight. Would be real nice if you could give him a good supper and show him a good time.”

I like to cook, and Jim always kept us supplied with food, much better than there had been on the ship. Any food was better than what we had back home. "Sure, Jim," I said. "I'd like that. What would you like to eat?"

Jim hesitated. "Well, I won't be here tonight," he finally said. "Just fix anything you think is nice." He paused again. ". . .Honey," he said at last, "do be nice to him. Really . . . nice."

"I will," I said, gently. "Don't worry. Wish you could be with us but, if you can't . . . I'll show him a good time. You take care of yourself, too!" I added, with mock severity.

"Don't worry," he said, stroking my cheek. "I'll be fine." He kissed me, then straightened up. "Be careful, get busy, honey," he said. "Ain't got a lot of time. You want to have everything just right for tonight."

When I opened the door, a nice young man said, "Hi. I'm Ed." He had an eager look on his face but a bit hesitant at the same time.

"You can call me Honey," I said. It was what Jim called me, and I liked it. I turned on some nice music while I was serving dinner, and smiled at him a lot and made light jokes.

"Daisies," he said, at one time, pointing to a big picture I had hung on the wall.

"They're my favorite flower," I told him, smiling fondly.

I served some wine with dinner, to help him loosen up.

Afterwards we danced and I held him tight, putting my head against his shoulder. After a while, he kissed me, and I responded.

It was a very pleasant night.

A month later, Jim asked me to entertain another visitor. Since I stayed in his apartment most of the time, and ate his food, I felt I owed him the courtesy of entertaining visitors. Besides, I found newcomers refreshing. Again, Jim wasn't able to be with us.

We didn't mind.

After the third visitor came and went a month later, I suddenly started having pains. Jim took me to a doctor.

"That's strange," the doctor said, after consulting his computer. "I find no records on you."

"Never been sick a day in her life," Jim said before I could answer. "Never had to work, neither Outworlder to boot, so there ain't no reason for her to have any records."

The doctor gave me a stern look. "You should have had your records transferred when you moved here," he said.

"Doctor, I've always been healthy," I told him, following Jim's lead. It was true, too. "I was so flustered over my first offworld trip, I didn't see why I should take the time to get records that would be of any real use."

"Well," he said, "you're going to have some records now." He nodded at a small open medical booth. "Stand over there, and we'll give the computer something to digest." It wasn't as advanced a booth as some I'd seen on Earth; instead of standing on the plate for a heartbeat, I had to stay in place a full minute. Even then, it didn't do a complete genetic workup, but it was sufficient for a basic health profile; height, weight, blood work, measurements -- enough so the computer would have a fairly thorough holographic record of my body, inside and outside.

After the examination, the doctor said, "You're one of the fortunate ones, young lady. Even though you're six months into your pregnancy, it hardly shows." He gently patted my belly. "Still, you need to take care of yourself; get more exercise, take these pills, and it might be a good idea if you held off on having any more sexual activity until after the baby gets here." He looked at Jim, as if to be certain I was understood.

"We'll abstain," I reassured the doctor. Jim nodded and said, "We certainly will."

The next few months were somehow different. Jim was kind and gentle, but somehow distant -- particularly that one time a month that a spaceship came to our station. I had figured it out by then: "special visitors" who came by were spacers -- or, at least, passengers from a space ship. What made them so "special" I didn't work out until months after the baby was born.

The baby I never saw.

Dreamily, I was aware I was again conscious and in my pain-filled hospital room. Why was I here? What had happened to me? All I could remember was that I hurt, had been hurting a long time, and I kept drifting back, back to my earlier -- dumber, stupider -- life on the station. I was still drifting. I remembered another hospital room. . . .

In my hospital room, after the baby had been born, I asked Jim to let me see my baby.

"Not now, honey," he said.

"But I want to hold him!" I said. "I want to nurse him and take care of him!"

"That . . . that wouldn't be a good idea, honey," he said, holding my hand and patting the back of my head.

"Why not?" I asked, instantly anxious. Sitting up, I said, "Is something wrong with my baby?"

Quietly, Jim nodded. "Spacers get exposed to all kinds of radiation. There are always shields and other kinds of protection, but -- Well, sometimes things don't go right. Doesn't show on the spacer, but it affects his sperm." He stopped.

"The baby didn't turn out right?" I asked, softly. "Is it," I stopped and swallowed before I completed the question, then said, softly, "alive?"

Jim nodded. "He's alive, all right, and he'll be taken care of."

"Of course he will!" I shouted. "I'll take care of him!" I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and started to get up.

Jim stopped me with a hand firmly on my chest. "No, honey; no. Everything's taken care of. The baby has a good home, now. Some people said they would be glad to take care of him."

"But he's my baby! I should take care of him!"

"Honey, this way is best. A farm couple took him. All farms are way out from other people. Nobody else will see him. If we kept him, there are lots of people here at the port. We couldn't hide him forever. Besides," he added, "we don't have room. We'd have to get another apartment, and I don't qualify for that." When I opened my mouth, he held up his hand and added, "Not only that; he's a reminder of a part of your life you keep telling me you want to forget. His spacer father did you wrong. Sometime you'd be mad at the father and take it out on his son, not," he added, quickly, "really meaning to! I know you'd love the baby, but there would just be too much baggage with him!" He gently pushed me back into bed. "Just lay there, and think about it for a while," he said. "I'm sure you will end up agreeing." He stood up, then placed a finger over my lips as I started to speak. "Not now!" he said. "Just think about it."

I went to sleep thinking about it, and thinking about all Jim had done for me.

A little over a month later, Jim brought another "special visitor" to our empty apartment. Not really empty; it just seemed that way because there were only the two of us in it. "You need this, honey," he said. "You'll be thinking more about entertaining our visitor than, than --"

"Than the baby," I finished for him. "You might be right, but there's one thing: Why would a farm take a deformed child?"

Jim smiled. "I keep forgetting you're so young, and you don't really know how this place works, honey. The soil, atmosphere and everything makes the produce of Tolerance Station popular throughout the universe! But it costs so much to grow the stuff, most farms are a one-family business covering hundreds and thousands of acres. Most everything is computer-operated, so just a few people can control an entire farm, but it keeps them all busy, husband, wife, and -- if they already had a child -- one kid. All of them are busy anywhere from ten to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. There ain't no time for the wife to take off being pregnant. A baby, now, they can work in; keep it beside the wife's computer terminal, with the crib on wheels so's she can take it from room to room, if she has to go do something else, like check on connections and things like that."

"Why don't they just hire some help?" I asked.

"Combination of things. Our planet doesn't charge export taxes to families, but really soaks corporations. Space law, on the other hand, says it ain't a family business if anyone other than family works there. Makes it a corporation, which families don't want. Got it?" he asked, lifting an eyebrow and nodding.

“Anyway,” he went on, “some wives miss having a baby, but they know they don’t have time to produce one themselves. They don’t like those produced by testube. So they adopt. Ain’t no babies the planet to adopt, so they come from offworld. That ain’t neces-sarily easy. So there were severa families eager to take care of your baby, no matter what he looked like.

“So I guarantee you he’s loved and well-taken care of. You should be proud of yourself, the honor you provided for him. He’s fine, and will grow up rich.” Jim smiled and stroked my hair. “So relax, I’m glad things turned out so well, and think about how nice it will be to have another guest to entertain.” Jim bent down and kissed me on the forehead. “See you tomorrow, honey.”

Figuring out that the guests were all from spaceships was only a small part of me deducing what was going on. Maybe Jim was involved in some kind of spy ring? But Jim didn’t seem like a spy and, anyway, I was the one with the visitor, not Jim.

Maybe he was just trying to be nice to a certain group, represented by the visitors, by showing me a good time? Maybe it was a group that could do him favors?

Such as?

It took me over a year to work it out. A year in which I gave birth to twins.

Before the twins were born, Jim sat down with me in the apartment and I found out the truth about my first baby.

“Honey, do you have any idea how much extra it costs me to take care of you?” He held up a hand to squelch what I was about to say. “Not that I wouldn’t do it all over again! I’m glad you are with me and hope you can stay here a long, long time. Still, it does eat deep into my credit account. Now, I found a way to replace some of that shortage. It happened when you were first pregnant. Doctors told me there were lots of farmers wanting babies, and told me how much it cost them to get one from offworld. Said families would gladly pay it, but they’d still like to save money.

“One doctor said he had a waiting list of families wanting to adopt. He said he was sure they’d be glad to pay us, particularly if they could pay less. Shocked me, how much money he suggested. Came right at a time when my balance was close to zero. Saved us, it did.”

I had been suspicious. I had thought about it a lot, and gradually came to the conclusion that what Jim had done was right. I didn’t know the figures, but I was certain I cost him lots of money, and he had been so nice to me. It wasn’t easy accepting it, but I did. “There wasn’t anything wrong with the baby, was there?” I asked, softly.

Jim hesitated, but then he shook his head. “No, honey; except for him being Lew Krant’s son. Nothing at all.” He put out a hand. “I didn’t like lying to you, but I didn’t want to worry you about money either.” He stroked my hair. “Forgive me?”

I smiled, just a little, then reached up and took his hand. “Jim, you’ve given me the closest thing to a family I’ve ever known. Before you, my world was nothing. Nil. Zero. Hunger and abuse. Now, thank you, I know what a home is really like.” I leaned forward and rested my head on his chest. “I owe you anything you want.”

Gently, Jim pushed away from me. “Honey, you might not say that after I tell you something.”

"It's the babies, isn't it?"

Jim nodded. "I -- I'm afraid I'm beginning to think of you as a baby factory; you get pregnant so easy! That, and all these farmers wanting babies. Seems others are kind of jealous that the one farmer has a baby actually born here. Now all of them want one! They -- they're willing to pay offworld prices just to have a baby born here! They say it's kind of like the produce; if it's born here, it's better!"

"If we build up enough credit, then we'll be able to afford a better place, and I can keep a baby here, baby?"

"Yes!" Jim said, eagerly. "Oh, yes, honey! For sure!"

So two families were happy after the twins were born. I squelched all my maternal instincts, and telling myself it was all to help Jim, that I would later be able to afford my own baby, and that life with Jim was really nice. Then, a few months after the twins, I found out the truth about our monthly guests.

He was the fourth one after the twins. As always, I met him at the door with a big smile. I was wearing a simple, low-cut white dress. "Dinner is --"

"The hell with dinner!" he said, as the door slid closed behind him. He reached out and grabbed me, forcing my body against his. "This is what I paid for!" he went on, forcing his lips against mine. One of his arms was around my waist; the other was lower, and his hand was squeezing my bottom. "Where's the bed?" he asked, pulling his head back an inch. Before I could say anything, he pushed me down on the floor. "Hell with a bed! It's been months since I've had a woman; we'll do it on the floor!" He ripped at a strap on my dress, pulling it off. I screamed.

He stopped.

"What was that about?" he asked. "I'm just after what I paid for!"

"I -- I don't know what you mean," I said, trying to pull away from him.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he asked. "The crew put eighteen thousand into the pot and I won the drawing! Eighteen thousand is a lot to pay, and then get pushed away!"

"I mean, you're a pretty expensive station wench, but I'll admit you are the youngest and sexiest I've ever seen."

"Station . . . wench?" I asked, puzzled.

"Don't you know from nothing? Nearly every station has one. Us guys get awful horny, out in space with no women. Stations try to provide at least one wench." A distant look glazed his eyes. "I remember one station, had three wenches. It's a real popular station."

"But . . . but I'm not . . ." I stopped, remembering our other "guests". I had . . . I mean, I did . . . Well, Jim had said to be nice to them, and I really liked each one of them, so we . . . Good Lord; good Lord! What had become of me?

"You're not?" the man was saying. "Now, that isn't what I've heard. I've heard lots of spacers talk about this station's wench, how pretty she was, how good she was, how they hoped to get back here some time."

"But they were all . . . nice about it," I said. "They weren't so impatient, so impulsive." I had been thinking about it. He knew the truth when I didn't. He came expecting me to know, too. Lots of money had been spent; spent on me. Jim had lied to me again, but I couldn't really take it out on this man. I could just calm him down, it might not be so bad. It wasn't as if I hadn't done it many times before.

I calmed him down, and it wasn't bad at all.

When Jim came back, I was furious. "You haven't just been selling my babies," I said. "You've been selling me!"

Jim hung his head. "I was going to tell you," he said. "But things were going so well with you not knowing, I thought maybe -- I mean, you were enjoying yourself and everything, and I wanted you to be happy, and I wasn't sure you would enjoy it if I . . ."

I was beginning to feel sorry for him, but I was determined not to let him get away with it, this time. "Your account should be running over by now!" I said, forcing myself to stay angry. "We could have a new apartment right now, and keep this baby!" Of course, I was pregnant. I shouldn't have said "the baby"; again, I was carrying twins.

"Honey, I don't --"

"Don't 'honey' me, Jim! I want a real home with a real baby that's mine to keep and raise! I want to see him grow up and everything!"

"I know that, honey," Jim said, in his soft way. "I have it all planned. But you need more than just enough money to get a bigger apartment; you need money to live on, after that. I got it all planned and honest! There are six more families signed up for babies; this pregnancy will take care of two of them. I've told the doctor that those six are the end of it. With the money from that, and from our monthly guests, you'll have plenty to live on the rest of your life! There'll be nothing else to worry about, honey! It's all planned, honest! If you don't believe me," he added, "you can ask the doctor."

Just four more, after this. The doctor had said I was liable to have twins again, or maybe even triplets. At the most, just another two years and I'd be set for life! "What if the birth after this is triplets?" I asked, softening and not even hating myself for it.

"It's always easy to find another family," Jim said. "You'll see."

The pain pulled me back to the hospital. In the haze, I was aware of several people around me.

". . . better," one of them said. ". . . responding," was another word one of them used. They did something, and some of the pain ebbed away. Consciousness left with the pain.

After the twins, the next birth was another single. That, however, was followed by triplets. "That's four remaining families!" Jim exulted, after hearing the doctor's prediction. He really did seem happy for me. I wasn't happy.

"I'm not through yet, Jim," I said. My voice was calm, but the words had trouble getting through my tight throat.

"What do you mean?" Jim asked. "I hate to see you retire, but I thought we had worked it all out. Now you have lots of money."

"But not enough," I said. I had learned a lot as time had passed. "I can't raise a son here. He'll be known everywhere as the son of the station wench! We'll have to move to another planet, where we won't be known. I'm afraid --" I had to swallow to continue "I'm afraid that means another year as Station Wench; another birth to sell.

"But after that!" I exclaimed, my voice rising, "Nothing! No more! One more year and that is it, Jim. That is it!"

But I didn't know, couldn't suspect, what the next year would bring.

After the triplets were born, Jim said, "You've changed." He didn't say "You've changed, honey" anymore. He didn't call me 'honey' any more.

"I know," I said. I had to change; a teenage innocent couldn't be a station wench. A teenage innocent couldn't sell her babies. I remembered my sisters calling me a straight-"A"s ignoramus, and telling me I didn't know about life. They were right. I even ordered a copy of Street Confessions. It was very expensive because it had to come from Earth, but they were right; I learned from it. I suppressed the innocent girl; she had no place here.

But my guests expected her.

Pain was everywhere. Pain that was different; pain that penetrated all my body, yet wasn't as sharp as it had been. Instead of burning in spots, instead of extreme agony that was localized, it was a level but all-over pain. The haze wasn't quite as thick; I could see a vase on the table beside my bed; it had daisies in it.

Daisies!

He brought me a daisy embedded in a crystal. He came three months after the last birth, twins the second time, and the first thing he did when the door opened was hand me the crystal.

"A daisy!" I exclaimed, first in surprise at what he handed me, followed immediately by a wave of recollection. "Ed!" I exclaimed. "You remembered!"

"How could I forget? You never forget your favorite girl's flower." He hesitated, then went on, quickly, "Especially when she was your very first girl." He had started quickly, but then his voice faded.

“Your . . . your first girl?” I asked, quietly, unbelievably.

He nodded, and looked away.

I touched his cheek. “Your first girl,” I said, a touch of bitterness and regret in my voice, “was a . . .” I couldn’t finish.

He looked at me, a sad and rueful expression on his face. “My first girl was a very sweet girl who didn’t even know she was -- Was what she was,” he finished, unable to say it.

Bitterness swelled in me. “A station wench!” I exclaimed. “That’s what I am and that’s what I was. Don’t you forget it.” Suddenly, without meaning to, I added, “I can’t!”

Ed put his arms around me, firmly but tenderly. “I know all about it. You didn’t know what you were getting into. You didn’t mean to be anything but nice. You . . . you’re an innocent who was led astray by circumstance. I even,” he added slowly, “think Jefferson Rook is a kind of cute name for such a sweet girl. I’d like to call you Jefi.”

“No!” I forced myself to say. (‘Jefi’; that sounded real nice. It was -- No!) “That first night, I might have really known everything, but I was no innocent! I was pregnant then! I’m not the kind of girl --”

We were standing close together, and he put a finger to my lips. “I’m not that old-fashioned . . . Jefi,” he said softly. “I never expected to meet, let alone marry, a virgin.”

“But you were --”

“Only by accident of occupation,” he said. “My first few years as a spacer, I didn’t make it big like the pros do. I had to send money home to my parents, so I couldn’t put anything into the wench pot. My pay had only reached that level the year I was lucky and met you. Oh, I had put money in for two or three stops, but didn’t win.” He held me close. “I’m glad I didn’t.”

“But you --”

“I think you have a lot of wrong ideas about me. I can’t say I’ve been faithful; I’ve won two wench pots since you, and I went. I went, but all they did was convince me I was right about you. I’m not a virgin, and don’t ask me how I feel that you are, but I’m convinced. Nothing you have done or said has changed my mind.”

I didn’t know how to handle him. This wasn’t anything I’d run into before, and certainly wasn’t covered in *Street Confessions*. I didn’t want to hurt him, or let him hurt himself by falling in love with me. Then I had an idea.

“Ed, I’m a baby factory! My little bastards (I had learned that term from *Confessions*) are in nearly every farm on this station! I sell them Ed!”

He didn’t look shocked.

“You couldn’t take care of so many kids. It’s better for them to be part of a small family.”

“. . . You don't seem surprised," I finally managed to say.

"I told you; I know all about you. I went to great lengths to find out everything I could. I mean, we only met the one time. I even tracked down Lew Krant. I wanted to be sure I was right." He smiled and added, "I was."

"You -- you're hopeless!" I exclaimed.

"What they used to call a hopeless romantic," he admitted, the smile still there. "I can even tell you about moradys."

"Oh, I know about that," I said, dismissing it.

"But not enough!" he said. "I found out why it's considered a disability. They say there's something in our genetic makeup that, reinforced by society, divides women into two groups: The sexually active who always seek sex, such as nymphomaniacs. The others are normal, feeling a little guilty about sex even though there's a substrata there, who brag about their exploits, sometimes even making them while still feeling guilt.

"Those with moradys, on the other hand, feel no guilt. At the same time, they also don't go after sex the way nymphos do, or feel any urge to talk about it. With them, sex is good when it happens, and they let it go at that."

I nodded. "Sounds like me," I said.

"I have an idea what's behind it, in your case," he said. "You are extremely fertile. I thought that might have triggered the moradys."

"I guess," I said. He had cleared up a few things, but they were things I wasn't that concerned with. Moradys, shmoradys, I was me, and that was all that counted.

"Not that explanations matter," he said. "Except that it's what makes up the girl I love." He kissed me. "What could I do? There was only one thing; after all, he had paid."

Late that night, Ed suddenly sat up. "I've got to go back to the ship!" he said. "There's something important I forgot to bring." He dressed quickly. I got up and got dressed, too.

"You don't have to go," he said.

I smiled. "You paid for the night; you're getting the night."

He stopped in the middle of putting on a boot. A strange look was on his face. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Finishing getting dressed, he headed for the door. "Let's go," he said.

It was a long time before he told me what he had started to say.

"You stay here," Ed told me, when we reached the street by the launch warehouse. Even though it was called a "launch" warehouse, it was where the ship landed, too. The "warehouse" was a large a

tall circular building with a landing pad in the center. When a ship landed, its cargo -- machinery, medicine, and other things not available on the planet -- was unloaded into the warehouse. After the produce waiting in the warehouse was carefully loaded, the ship was inspected and, if necessary, repaired, and then would return to space.

"Why can't I go in with you?"

"Sometimes guards come by, to be sure no one steals anything," he said. "Besides," he added, smiling, "I want to surprise you. I'll be back quickly," he said, patting my shoulder. Still smiling, he turned and went across the street to the warehouse door. He turned, waved, and then went inside.

In a few minutes, two guards coming from opposite directions met in front of the door. I was still across the street, so they didn't see me. They talked for a minute or so, and then suddenly turned and there was the sound of an explosion from inside.

Ed!

I ran across the street and got there just in time to hear one guard say, "Thank goodness there no one inside!"

"Ed's in there!" I said. "Do something!"

"Ed?" one of them said. "Who's he?"

"He's a spacer from that ship!" I said. "Do something!"

"Help's on the way," he told me, trying to sound reassuring. "There's an automatic alarm system we've got is those fire blankets inside the door."

"We can't wait!" I cried. I don't know where the strength came from, but I pushed both guards down and rushed through the door. I was glad that many doors used the palm plate only to activate the opener, and weren't coded the way private doors were. Down a long hall, I saw flames. But I didn't see the fire sheets the guard had mentioned. I was about to run on anyway, when I noticed a locker behind the door. Yanking it open, I found fire sheets hanging there. Grabbing one, I turned and ran.

"Ed!" I shouted. "Ed! Where are you?"

The cavernous building echoed my cry and my running footsteps. It echoed something else very ominous -- the roar of flames. I ran towards one of the rooms that would lead to the ship. The door was hot to my touch, but it responded and flames leaped out. I was glad I had held the fire sheet in front of me. It reflected the inferno, but heat still swirled around me.

"Ed! Where are you?" Smoke and flames were everywhere. I bent down, so I could see under and -- there he was! On the floor, against the far wall, between two stacks of crates. One leg looked bent at a strange angle.

"Ed!" I screamed, and ran to him. To my surprise, I heard footsteps behind me and, glancing back, saw two silvery-uniformed firemen not far behind me. I looked back at Ed and fear clogged my throat. The two stacks of crates that had been protecting Ed had burst into flame! With a burst of speed, I ran beside him, over him, draping the fire sheet over both of us. Then, added to the crackle of the fire, came the crackle of crates breaking apart! Heat seared me, something struck me on the head, and I remembered no more.

Someone was talking. “. . . absolutely amazing they went through all that unscathed. I doubt it would even bring on a premature birth. Of course, they were cushioned. . . .” “. . . always astoundingly productive, so many multiple births. . . .”

“She’s stirring! Blood pressure normal, looking good.”

I took a deep breath, coughed, then tried again. It felt good. “Hello,” I managed, then licked my

“Here,” someone said. “Take a sip.” A straw touched my lips. I drank greedily. “Easy!” a voice laughed. “I said ‘a sip’.”

I looked around. There were four people in the room, all wearing the white of medical professionals. “Where. . . .” I paused, because I was afraid to ask, but had to know. “Ed?” I managed. After all, they said ‘they’ went through it unscathed. I felt my face. There was a bandage on one cheek. If we were unscathed, why the bandage? Why all the pain? Suddenly I understood; they were talking about my babies. I sat up. “Where’s Ed? Is -- is he. . . ?”

They looked at each other. One of them smiled. “I think we should leave,” he said.

I held out a restraining hand. “Ed?” I asked again.

The one who had smiled took my hand. “That’s why we should leave,” he said. “You might want some privacy.” He palmed the door open and Ed, in a wheelchair, rolled in after they departed.

“Hello, Jefe,” he said, in his soft voice. He rolled up beside my bed. “I’m glad you’re awake.”

I looked at him. The skin of his face was shiny, and there was only a short stubble of hair on his scalp. I looked at his wheelchair. His legs were covered by a blanket. “They remade your face,” I managed, weakly. “I’m glad,” I added, “that you’re alive.” My eyes blurred with tears.

“They remade more than my face,” he said, with that familiar smile on his new lips. He pulled back the blanket, revealing a pair of shorts and new legs. “I’m still learning to walk,” he added, “but I’ll be right. Please don’t cry!”

“I’m so happy,” I blubbered. “I thought I had lost you.”

“Two more minutes and you would have,” he said. “I’m sure glad you came with me!”

“I had to,” I said, smiling back at him. “As I said, you had paid for the night.”

Slowly, Ed shook his head. “I have a confession to make. I started to tell you when you first mentioned about me paying for the night.” He paused, then went on quickly. “I didn’t win the lottery. The drawing was to be for our last night, and I couldn’t wait! I knew about Jim, so I looked him up and told him I had to see you. He just kind of smiled and said something about us deserving each other, why not? Then I came.”

A warm feeling swelled over me, and it wasn’t fever. “Jim can be sweet,” I said. I noticed, then, there was an envelope and a small box on his lap.

“What’s that?” I asked.

He handed me the envelope. “This is from Jim,” he said.

I took the envelope, hesitated, then opened it.

Honey --

I’m ashamed of myself. I took advantage of you, used you badly, and did so little for you in return. This is just to let you know that I deposited a large amount of credit with the hospital, probably much more than the bill will be. Spacer’s insurance will take care of Ed’s bill. Keep whatever is left over.

I’m taking all the rest of it and leaving.

Jim

My warm feeling vanished. My fortune! The money that was going to take care of me and my baby for the rest of our lives, the money that would get us off Tolerance Station, where everyone knew me. I read and stared at the letter. A tear rolled down to the tip of my nose.

“Jefi?” Ed asked, concern in his voice. “What’s wrong?”

I handed him the letter. “He -- he sold --” My throat was getting tight. Depression blanketed me. I took a sip of water and a deep breath. “He sold all my children, and now he’s taking the money!” I took another breath, and the depression was burned away by anger. “I was going to move offworld with my money, raise my baby where no one would know! He ran off with my future!”

Ed squeezed my hand. “There’s no need to run off,” he said. “My spacer’s contract has a clause for me; if I’m disabled, I get a good lifetime income.” He looked down at his legs. “Rebuilt legs are great, but not as good as the original; I also have a rebuilt arm that isn’t quite as good. I’ll be able to get around here okay, but not good enough for space. We can live on Tolerance Station on my income, real easy.”

“‘We’?” I repeated.

“I have something else for you,” he said. “I had brought the engagement ring with me, that night when I had left this. This is why I went back.” He handed me the small box. I opened it and saw a beautiful diamond wedding ring.

“Ed! Oh, Ed,” I said, crying. He slipped the ring on my finger, and I cried some more. But then I stopped.

“You don’t understand!” I said. “I have to leave! Here, everyone knows me as the station wench who couldn’t raise a child --”

I was interrupted by the opening of my door. A six-year-old boy stood there, a card in his hand. He had a big grin on his face, and there was a sense of pride in his manner as he came to me. “This is for you, Mother,” he said, handing me the card. It said, in clumsy stick letters, “Happy Mother’s Day,” and went on, “I made it myself! Momma told me what letters to make,” he added, shyly.

Tears of joy in my eyes, I reached out and hugged him.

Suddenly the room was crowded with people, all happy, some carrying bouquets of daisies. “Happy Mother’s Day!” they all said.

A woman standing beside my son said, “We made it an official holiday! That, and Christmas, are the only two days out of the year we shut down our farms!” She leaned down and kissed my forehead. “Thank you, Station Mother!” Then she added, “The children call us Ma or Momma or Mom, or things like that. You, they all know, are Mother.”

“We owe it to you,” a man said, “and so much more! We took a vote, and all agreed you get free produce for the rest of your life. Also,” he added, pulling a folded piece of paper out of his pocket, “here’s a deed to your very own farm!”

“But . . . but,” I stammered, “I’m not a farmer!”

Another man said, “You grow the most important crop at our station!” He held up a blanket-wrapped baby. “Definitely,” he added, kissing the baby’s cheek, “the most important crop!”

A smiling doctor had wedged his way into the room. “And totally undamaged by the fire!” he said, “I mean,” he added, “your reproductive capacity was undamaged. You are carrying two very healthy twins.” He looked at me, the smile fading. “But one very important thing: Jim seemed to think no farmer’s wife had babies because they didn’t have time. I didn’t bother correcting him, but the truth is the planet has an effect on humans that wasn’t discovered, at first because it’s slow-acting, cumulative. Any woman who stays here much over a year becomes sterile. For that reason, few females stay here much over six months. But before that was found out, it was discovered that the produce grown here was fantastic. It became highly popular throughout the universe. Those already affected opted to stay and some -- lured by the financial rewards -- decided to come and settle in any case. But they still wanted children, and adoption was, till you came along, the only way.

“Produce has to be thoroughly cleaned and inspected before it can be shipped,” the doctor continued, “to be certain it won’t affect the consumers. But children you produce are another matter. He smiled.

I looked at the crowd. “You mean, it doesn’t matter . . . I mean, you don’t care . . .” I couldn’t finish on.

“She’s ashamed of being a station wench,” Ed finished for me.

“Hey, do you think we’re ashamed we have to buy seeds?” a farmer asked. “So long as it’s from good stock, the source doesn’t really matter. Why do you think we named this Tolerance Station?”

I smiled at Ed. “It’ll be from real good stock,” I said. “But we’re going to keep one for ourselves.”