

Dale Anderson Goes to Space
A Short Story

By Gabrielle Bardell

Dale Anderson stepped across the threshold of the A62041 Space Liner - Luxury Edition. He had braced himself for blastoff, passed out for the passage through the atmosphere, and enjoyed the rest of the space taxi ride that dropped him off directly at the entrance of the ship. This was it, this was the moment Dale had been dreaming of his entire life, and now it was finally happening. He took a moment to breathe in the sensations of the present, appreciating the way the black marble floors sparkled with the constellations etched into their grooves. The sheer magnitude of the lobby was overwhelming. With some quick mental math, Dale calculated that the ceilings must have stretched eight to ten stories high, and had hand blown glass chandeliers made from moon sand collected from all fourteen of Neptune's moons, a neat little tidbit he remembered from one of his travel brochures. Ah, the smell of freshly polished carbon composite filled Dale with a euphoria like nothing ever before, and now his thoughts seemed to dance to the grand orchestral music of the main foyer. And what was truly magnificent was the way the engineers managed to recreate the gravitational pull experienced on earth, all while the shuttle soared thousands of miles away from it. Yes, he was right where he belonged. Dale pushed up his glasses and lunged toward the check-in counter.

"Dale P. Anderson! Reporting for intergalactic check-in at 0800 hours! Over!" Dale said.

He enunciated with surprising clarity given that his entire voice seemed to come out of his nose. He stood back and saluted to the front desk agent (rather pretty too, he thought), all five foot two of him bristling with pride as he handled the situation by the correct protocol.

"It's a pleasure to have you aboard, Mr. Anderson, we've been waiting for you. I think you'll find your journey aboard the A62041 quite enjoyable. Now if you'll simply leave your bags and your space-suit here with me, we'll be glad to take care of the rest and show you to your quarters. We have you in the Supernova room."

Dale leaned in closer to read the lovely receptionist's name tag, which happened to be perfectly placed beside the half-zipped zipper of her form-fitting spacesuit.

"N-A-T-A-L-I-A, Nataaaalia," Dale said. When he talked his face contorted in unpredictable ways and his mouth scrunched up which pushed his cheeks against his eyes, making him squint involuntarily, "well, I appreciate all of your help Natalia, but I must be off! Onward toward the great supernova of the universe ten billion trillion light years away! Space cadet Anderson, signing out!"

Natalia smiled sweetly as she sent him down the hallway with two of her equally stunning counterparts, admiring his enthusiasm and his complete lack of pretense, which to her placed him in a rather pleasant contrast with the other patrons that came aboard.

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Dale hummed the theme of “Galaxy Battles,” his all-time favorite space film, as he triumphantly marched down the starry corridors of the shuttle to his room. He tipped the two lovelies that brought in his things and sent them off, ready to indulge in his itinerary and plan his time aboard the A62041. Nice, he thought, that such beautiful women also had the brains to become pioneers of the universe, you just don’t find that on Earth. Well, perhaps you might, but they’re difficult to come by at the least. It seemed as though this operation was teeming with them, though. Ah, distractions! Dale wouldn’t allow a moment more to be wasted on such frivolous thoughts, so he pulled out his space comics and quickly engrossed himself in their truths.

While laying on his bed, Dale completely immersed himself in *Astronaut Dan: One Man’s Adventure Through Nebula’s and Supernovas*, his absolute favorite material. Comics like these proved to Dale that ordinary men could witness extraordinary things! To think, the things Astronaut Dan experienced would soon be Dale’s for the taking as the A62041 made its way through the cosmos, making stops along the way so its passengers could marvel at some of the most remarkable things of the universe! Perhaps Dale would be a spectator as hydrogen and helium joined forces with other gases to form the most brilliant cloud of interstellar stardust as they dance in a nebula--the birth of a star. Or maybe the ship would soar past a giant celestial body right at the pinnacle of its death, exploding in the most superb display of colorful collateral damage a supernova has to offer! And on this ship, this voyage, Dale would be at the center of it all, in daring outer space odysseys and engaging in heroic acts.

After hours of studying his comics and other astronomical science books he brought with him, Dale still couldn’t believe he was lucky enough to actually make it into space. He thought about his childhood and how he would beg his mother to take him to the pool, and while all the other kids were laughing and playing and wasting their time splashing about he would spend countless hours making efficient use of the deep end, adjusting to the feeling of weightlessness and practicing somersault maneuvers. Every time Halloween and his birthday came around, Dale was always an astronaut, *always*. In college, he joined every outer space club he could find, but every single one of them all seemed to fall short of his expectations, no one ever felt as

passionately about astrosience as he did, and why was he the only one who ever wore his space-suit to the meetings? Everything in his life seemed to come together at one distinct point like a black hole at the center of a galaxy when he, Dale Patrick Anderson, born November third two thousand and sixty four, was announced the first winner of the A62041 Space Liner destination giveaway. Luck? Some might say so, but Dale knew otherwise. Fate had brought him this gift. Traversing the universe was his destiny, and now he was certain that he was only put on planet Earth to leave it.

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Just as Dale was in the middle of his daily live action role playing routine, which was necessary if he was going to be appropriately prepared for space expeditions, his room buzzer went off.

“Intruder alert! Intruder alert!” Dale said. He leapt off of his bed, spacesuit and all, and opened the door. “Oh, greetings Natalia, I wasn’t expecting you. I’m sort of in the middle of something right now, perhaps you can come back later.”

Natalia noticed the way Dale had meticulously strapped himself into his suit, and thought it endearing. “Oh, well, actually Dale, you’re schedule has been rearranged a bit and we have a training appointment for you at sixteen hundred hours. I apologize for any inconvenience this may cause you, but I assure you this will be an experience like you’ve *never* had before. We’ll see you in the Eagle Nebula room in half an hour.”

Natalia swiftly walked away as Dale gently shut the oversized hatch door behind her. He did feel slightly inconvenienced, and he was glad Natalia recognized that, but that feeling was quickly overcome by the thought of the experience that was soon to ensue! Oh, this was everything he had ever dreamed of and more!

As Dale made his way through the shuttle, ethereal space music played in the background, and with each laser beam sound effect he felt more and more like he had his own theme song. Everything just felt. So. Right! The anticipation and excitement he felt were almost tangible. He knew from his intensive study of the pamphlet he had been given that the Eagle Nebula room was for, “weightless experiences: like nothing you’ve ever felt before” and this was only the beginning! Goll-ly it felt like he had an entire team of astro-vacation planners who had known him since birth and were feeding him his dreams on a silver platter. But it was time to think straight! All at once the hatch to the Eagle Nebula room was before him, a gateway to the

manifestation of his innermost longings fulfilled. He rang the buzzer twice, the first one to get them to let him in, the second out of impatience.

The hatch opened so slowly that Dale started to squirm. He was so anxious to experience real weightlessness he almost didn't notice the man who appeared before him, *almost*.

The man was impeccably dressed, wearing a fitted black suit with a few buttons left undone at the top to reveal just the right amount of chest hair. His hair was dark and slicked back, ensuring nothing could get in the way of his clear green eyes which held a penetrating gaze, making even Dale a little self conscious. His tan skin seemed to glow in the warm light of the the grand room behind him, and when he smiled his teeth shined so beautifully it made one wonder if he had stolen light from the sun itself and placed it within each tooth.

"Ahhh, welcome my friend! Welcome welcome welcome. Please come in." The man beckoned Dale forward with a smile, his voice was deep and strong and confident and with an accent Dale couldn't quite place.

"Is this the Eagle Nebula room? I believe I'm supposed to be weightless right about now. I think I'll just show myself out," he said, feeling that he must have been in the wrong place.

The room behind the man was reminiscent of a library in an English manor, but without the books. Mahogany panels lined the thirty-something foot high walls from floor to ceiling, and brown leather sofas and chairs were carefully placed atop the loveliest Persian rugs good taste and an money could buy. Aged whiskey sat in bottles behind the wooden bar and in glasses strewn about the room, and cigar smoke rose in heavy puffs to the ceiling. There were two spiral staircases at opposite ends of the room, leading up to an open hallway along the perimeter that looked over the grand open space with doors all along. Weightlessness rooms, Dale surmised. As he looked around he saw at least twenty other men dressed in a similar fashion to the man standing before him, and more beautiful women than he had ever seen adorned in evening gowns and fine jewelry.

"Not so fast my new friend! There is more here than meets the eye, I must assure you. Forgive me, I haven't introduced myself. My name is Felix, and this," he said with a grand gesture which seemed to encompass everything, "is my operation."

"Well how do you do Felix? On Earth they call me Dale." He stuck out his hand. "I must say this isn't quite what I was expecting." Dale's face scrunched up like it does, and his eyes looked around the room while the rest of his head and body remained completely still. He had

always had a hard time masking his disappointment, and this felt an awful lot like those times in college when he would walk into the space club meetings and find out he was the only one who *really* cared.

“Like I said, there is more here than meets the eye. Allow me to give you a tour.”

Dale followed Felix over to the bar.

“Whiskey?” Felix asked.

“Mmmm-no thank you. I’d rather keep my head straight.”

“Well I don’t think it’s going anywhere in that nice helmet you’ve got on there.” Felix gave a charming smile. “Dale, this is a place where you come to *relax*. For years venturing into space has been nothing but research and freeze-dried food, but I have breathed new life into the meaning of space travel! Here on the A62041, you will coast along the celestial winds like a passenger of the luxury water liners of yesteryear! So take off your helmet, and enjoy what I have created for you my friend, you are my very special guest.”

“I’d rather keep it on.”

“As you wish. Ahhh, Natalia, my sweet!”

It was Natalia again, only this time it wasn’t any old jumpsuit she was wearing. She had on a long black evening gown that left just enough to the imagination, and her dark hair was pulled fetchingly to one side. Felix motioned her over and kissed her passionately on the cheek upon her arrival, she was clearly his prize.

“Hello Dale, I see you and Felix are getting along well,” she said, pleasantly.

“You again,” Dale was struck by Natalia’s grace and beauty, which made him very uncomfortable. He figured a disgruntled response would make her want to leave, and that way he wouldn’t have to figure out clever ways to hide his discomfort. No woman like Natalia had ever even come close to looking at Dale before, much less spoken to him, and he hadn’t quite figured out what the appropriate social behavior was in this type of situation.

Felix, with a social IQ of at least 145, quickly sensed the tension that was beginning to build and offered a smooth subject transition, “My darling, as you know this is Dale’s first day aboard my vessel. And I would like you to be the one to show him upstairs.” Felix said to Natalia.

“Me? Are you sure? Certainly there is someone more qualified than I, Felix.” Natalia was obviously hesitant to Felix’s request.

“Nonsense Natalia! There is no one better than you, I will not have it any other way! Now show my guest what I myself am unfit to show him!” Felix’s voice was light-hearted yet thunderous. Natalia smiled at Felix in a subordinate manner, and looked to Dale.

“Right this way.”

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As Dale followed Natalia up the staircase his heart could have burst from the cavity that contained it. Years of disappointment continued unabated, insurmountable, up until moments ago, but the time for that was finally over. This. was. It. The sound of his big white boots hitting the floor, one after the other, seemed to echo in his ears with each step he took. He watched Natalia through the glass in his helmet as she reached for the handle of the door and seemingly into his wildest, most feverish dreams. As she waved him forward with a graceful stroke of her arm, the entire universe went silent for but a moment as Dale saw the words “*come in*” leave Natalia’s lips - *saw*, not heard, for the only thing he could hear was his heart beating wildly in his chest. He approached the place Natalia had been standing, knowing the next step would be like one he had never taken before.

Dale sprung into the room like he had rocket boosters attached to his boots, reveling in the joys of weightlessness once and for all! The room was a standard size anti-gravity chamber, about forty feet by forty, but the view, oh but the view! The entire back wall was crystal clear, and it was as if nothing existed between Dale and the whole of the cosmos as it beckoned him to reach out and touch it. The space liner was currently making its way past Neptune, and they had come so close you couldn’t even see the whole planet as it took up nearly half of the viewport, its sapphire hues brilliant against the starry backdrop. Dale floated toward the glass.

“Why! It’s just. It’s just. It’s JUST! I mean, Natalia, clearly I can hardly articulate my thoughts at the moment. The surrealism of it all is almost too much to handle! Oh-ho-ho, but it’s not! I mean are you seeing this? I know you’ve been here before but I’m transfixed, bewitched, captivated, entranced! Natalia?”

Silence.

“...Nataliaaaa?”

Dale awkwardly maneuvered his body so that he could turn around and see the rest of the room, which was more difficult than one might think while suspended in air, or the absence of it, rather.

“Hello Dale.”

“Oh my gosh Natalia! What are you doing?! Why is your dress over there? Put your clothes back on!” Dale shielded his eyes and turned his head away.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?”

“I-I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about me Dale. Or any other woman here for that matter. We’re all here for the convenience and pleasure of the men aboard this vessel.”

“Whaaaaat?”

“I... I thought you knew. This entire space shuttle is the most elaborate and ambitious scheme for a brothel the human race has ever concocted, and that’s why Felix had no other choice than to take his operation into space. Ever since the feminist revolution in 2052, both you and I know the world is a very different place for men than it used to be. I think male oppression has almost become too much to bear for some, poor dears, and this is a place for them to escape and not feel ashamed of their desires, but rather, to indulge in them.”

Dale understood. He understood exactly. But that didn’t make the news go down any smoother. It felt like someone had ripped off his helmet in the midst of space and all the air was sucked from his lungs until he reached his imminent death. It was that kind of feeling, but inside of his heart. His mind began racing. His whole life, the somersault maneuvers, the space comics, the themed birthday parties that no one ever showed up to, the constant reworking of his EMU (extravehicular mobility unit, or space suit) to fit him as he outgrew it, the college clubs, all of it, it was all for this. For this?! How could he have fallen for it, *again*? He gazed out the window, not knowing quite what to do, how to feel.

“You willfully signed up for this?” Dale asked.

“Well, yes and no,” Natalia said, seeming suddenly shy at the idea of talking about herself, “I had always wanted to travel into space, ever since I was a little girl. You might not believe this but I used to join every outer space club I could find, just to see if I could get a taste, even a tiny droplet, of what it would be like to leave the Earth. When I heard the very first luxury space liner was looking for female astro-enthusiasts, it was like a chorus of tiny angels were singing my name from the heavens, and I had to go! Only... when I got here, I found out the true nature of the job. By that time, it was too late to turn back.”

“I fear you and I have reached the same fate Natalia, the fate of the truest and purest form of disappointment the human mind could possibly fathom. And you my dear, although I hate to admit it, may have gotten it worse than I.”

Dale remained facing the window as he spoke to her, still uncomfortable with the thought of an undressed woman in the very room that he occupied. Dale, thirty five years old, had never been with a woman.

“Dale,” Natalia said. Her tone had an urgency in it that wasn’t there before. “Dale do you want to do something crazy?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. I’ve always been partial to the rules. They’re there for a reason you know.”

“Yes but Dale, you and I, we share a dream. A dream of tiptoeing upon the stars like they’re stepping stones in a playground. We’re kindred! And not just that, but I know where the escape shuttles are...”

“You don’t mean to suggest...”

“That’s exactly what I’m suggesting.”

“But we couldn’t!”

“But we could! Do you see those ducts over there?” Natalia pointed to large ducts at the top corner of the room. “Those ducts are tunnels large enough for us to crawl through, and they lead exactly to the landing where the escape shuttles are docked. We could do this Dale. ‘Room service’ will be here in fifteen minutes with the chocolate sauce and whipped cream, but if we leave now I think we could make it!”

Dale didn’t know what to do. It was like the right and left sides of his body were being acted upon by the gravitational pulls of two stars of equal mass, and everyone knows what that’ll do. On the one side were the rules, the confines of life Dale had learned not only to follow but to love. On the other side was the unknown, the wild, crazy, exciting, enticing, wondrous, spectacular UNKNOWN!

“Let’s go.” Dale said.

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Natalia skillfully unhinged the cover of the duct with a pin from her hair.

“I’m going to have to keep my dress off so I can move quickly enough, and I suggest you do the same with your spacesuit. I’ll have to go first to navigate, but whatever you do, do not

look at my butt. It contains hypnotic powers so strong no man has ever been known to overcome them.”

Dale rolled his eyes. Women, he thought, can be so vain.

“I’ll take off my suit, but it’s coming with me.”

Dale stripped himself of his bulky EMU to reveal long johns underneath, a style reminiscent of the type men would wear in the 1800’s. He fashioned a tether with one of the tubes from his suit, and secured the suit to his ankle. He pushed himself off of the wall opposite to the duct and aimed straight for the opening, his body hitting the wall a few feet away. He pulled himself over and in to follow behind Natalia, who had already gotten a head start. He shuffled and shimmied until he was within a few feet of her, trying and failing in the cramped space to find someplace more gentlemanly toward which to direct his eyes.

“Dale, what took you so long? We’re running out of time. We’ve got to hurry.” Natalia spoke in hushed tones so the people in the other rooms wouldn’t hear them. “Dale? Dale!”

She looked behind her, and cursed the gods for bestowing upon her the most beautiful derriere mankind had ever seen. Dale had fallen prey to the stunning view of her hind quarters, and she should have known how harsh the effects would be on him. His eyeballs were widened almost to the size of quarters, and he drooled as if he had been infected with rabies. His body had become limp except for the involuntary convulsions. This was bad, this was really really bad. Natalia knew there was only one cure. Usually she was too embarrassed to administer the appropriate dose, but she had no choice. She prepared herself mentally, and in a moment of great feminine fortitude released the most wretched smelling gas one could imagine. Actually, it was so wretched, one literally cannot imagine how terribly awful smelling the gas really was. The staff was not allowed to raid the guest’s larder, and had to eat those terrible, protein-enriched tube meals, after all. The odor quickly dissipated throughout the entire system of the ducts, and all at once Dale snapped out of his delirium. He began choking on the toxic air, but he would survive. What was most important is that they reach the dock before word got back to Felix that the two of them had escaped.

“We’ve almost reached the landing. Follow my every move and we have a chance Dale!”

Dale watched as Natalia once again unhinged the screen, unlocking a portal to their destinies! Although he was careful this time to never again focus on her rear end. That was a grave mistake with consequences that were quite literally almost too much to bear. Natalia

lowered herself to the landing in one fluid motion, and as Dale crawled toward the opening of the duct, the view before him was so impeccably magnificent he didn't know whether he wanted to let out a cry of joy or weep with delight. The landing was five times the size of the lobby and nearly twenty stories high! It differed entirely from the rest of the shuttle in that it held the standards of what a space shuttle should *really* look like. Everything was black and silver and shiny and not a thing was out of place. There were dozens of escape shuttles along either side of a runway that *was nothing but space*. It was just like Galaxy Battles!

Dale jumped to the landing as Natalia slipped back into her dress and began to hastily make her way toward one of the small shuttles.

"Hurry!" Natalia said.

Dale was gathering up his spacesuit, careful not to leave anything behind.

"I'm right behind you Natalia!"

Just as Natalia was headed toward the escape shuttle in slot 306 with Dale tagging along closely behind her, Felix burst through the doors at the far end of the landing. Behind him was an army of security dressed in black jumpsuits and helmets, all marching powerfully in unison.

"Stop those two!" Felix said, but he was looking directly at Natalia.

Natalia lifted the shuttle door and assumed her position in the captain's seat.

"Get in Dale! Get in, get in!"

"I'm... right... BEHIND YOU!" Dale clumsily yet triumphantly dropped himself into the passenger's seat.

The shuttle made a low whirring sound as Natalia activated flight mode and they began to levitate out of slot 306, which all at once seemed to symbolize a place where shattered dreams and longings unfulfilled would remain for all of eternity. Felix had run over to the deck near the escape shuttle and looked up at Natalia and Dale with both fury and amazement.

"Natalia," Felix yelled up, "I know I can't stop you now, but before you go, you must answer me one question. I've given you everything you could have ever dreamed of, everything you've ever wanted. Why? Why do you leave me?" He looked at her with longing in his eyes.

Natalia was able to hear his voice through the speakers inside of the shuttle, and when she spoke, her reply was broadcast loud enough for all who stood on the landing to hear.

"Oh but you see Felix, that's just it. You could try and try for the rest of your life, but you could *never* give me what I truly want, even if your life existed in a space-time continuum that

existed forever. Because if I told you the truth Felix, which I am right now, what I want is the man sitting next to me on this shuttle. He's the kind of man I've always dreamt of, and you will never be half the man that he is."

Natalia looked to Dale, who had become so flush with color that his helmet began to fog up. "It's you Dale. It's always been you. Even when I didn't know you, you were with me in my dreams." Natalia ripped off Dale's helmet, which really had no purpose on his head at the present moment anyway, and kissed him so passionately, so wildly, that it sent off a shock wave throughout the entire universe that will continue until the end of time.

"Natalia I... I..." Dale was, quite literally, speechless.

Felix stood on the landing in awe as Natalia pushed the throttle forward and soared through the corridor with nothing but the cosmos beyond.

"What are you waiting for men?! Shoot! SHOOT!"

But the kiss witnessed by the security force had melted all of their hearts, and the shots blasted from their guns were simply a conjoined effort to reveal a more marvelous fireworks display than any fairytale could ever hope for. Dale looked behind him at the spectacular light show, then to Natalia, then towards the great beyond.

"Onward toward the great supernova of the universe ten billion trillion light years away!"

The End