

## Off On The Wrong Foot

The Gossamer Wings' three cargo bays sprayed out at the back of the butterfly-shaped ship, separated by thick bay walls and thousands of feet of unseen wires. Secured metal crates, some as small as a case of soda, and others as big as a small house, stood in ordered chaos throughout the compartments. What was in them was a mystery to the ship's crew. When the United States government granted Gayle Darwin a contract to transport people and supplies between Earth and the outer habitats, part of the stipulation had been that she had to make government shipments free of charge, though she received credits on her loan. Like so many other clandestine government dealings, Gayle was not guaranteed knowledge of what she was carrying, and mostly, she didn't even want to know.

Surveying the bevy of small boxes in Cargo 2, though, she was the slightest bit curious. It was entirely likely that she was carrying crates of Mars rock back to be analyzed for alternate uses, or to be sold as souvenirs. The recent secrecy of the administration, though, made her suspicious that something much more sinister could be ongoing. Rick would have wanted her to snoop in the crates to find out. He was braver, and had less to lose than she did.

Everything looked secure. Part of her reason to visit the freight compartments was to check on the work of the cargo crew. This was their first mission, after all. The neat and secure placement of the load let her know that in at least this one area of the ship, she had little to worry about. Now if she could get the rest of her employees in line, particularly the Captain, she would be set.

Gayle looked at her watch, her lips pursing into a tortured grin. A number of the crew, command staff as well as some of the general workers, had not yet checked in from their short leave on Genesis Station. She had considered staying over an extra day on the first trip so that all the first-timers could adequately explore the amazing space station, but the government transport order had ruined those plans. Now she supposed they would have to hunt some people down, and potentially leave some behind. Her crew wasn't large, but she didn't know how long it would take to find seventeen people in the suspended city as large as a minor metropolis.

At least there was one she knew she could recall immediately. Gayle pulled her phone from her belt and dialed Alexa Petrov's number. After the third ring, the Passenger Relations Manager answered.

"Hi, Gayle. Are we ready to go?"

Gayle couldn't help but smile at hearing the light tone in her friend's voice. "We would be if you were on the ship." She could hear laughter through the short pause on the line.

Alexa muffled the communicator momentarily. "At least I'm not the only one," she said.

"Ha, ha. It's all fun and games until I leave you behind and you have to beg on the trains for change," Gayle said.

"I don't know about everyone else, but I have my debit chip fully charged. Besides, you wouldn't leave us."

Gayle laughed. "What makes you think that? I don't have any passengers on the return trip, so I don't even need you."

The busy sounds in the background faded out again. "I'm hurt, I want you to know. But I'm comforted in the fact that I have something you can't leave without."

"What would that be?"

"The Captain," Alexa said, her voice triumphant.

Unfortunately she had a point. Even if Gayle had been serious about leaving her friend behind, she needed the captain to supervise the flight. Gayle supposed she knew enough to handle all the functions of the ship for a smooth flight, but she didn't have the required knowledge for emergencies.

Shifting the phone to the other hand and began leaving the cargo bay for her quarters. "I guess you've got me on that one."

Alexa laughed, and then turned more serious. "Do we need to come back right now, Gayle? We were just seated at a restaurant."

"How many people are with you?"

"Three with me. I think I saw two other people from the ship get seated a few minutes ago," she said.

Gayle groaned. She was definitely going to have to set some stricter ground rules. "No, you don't need to come back yet. I'll call you when it's time."

Alexa muffled the phone again, but the business woman could hear her talking with someone. A moment later, Alexa said, "I've got a better idea. Why don't you join us? I know you haven't eaten. This place is supposed to be awesome."

It had been several hours since she'd eaten breakfast, and there was nothing more she could do to prepare for departure apart from waiting like a mother hen for her wayward crew. She supposed she should wait around being mad. "How far is it?"



Alexa Petrov clicked her phone shut, a smile on her lips. Getting Gayle to do anything remotely not related to work was usually a triumph. While Alexa certainly did not consider herself a social butterfly, she did manage to relax more than her boss seemed to. When it seemed safe, she tried to rub off on her friend.

The former flight attendant looked around the table at her companions, most of whom were new friends. So far, her experience as the Passenger Relations Manager on the Gossamer Wings had been a positive. If nothing else, it had made her socialize more than she might normally. At the moment, she was surrounded by Captain Norman Jones, the ship's doctor Zora Choi, and the engineer Ricardo Benitez. They had all embarked on a morning exploration of the space station with the Captain as their guide.

The Captain wasn't anything like Alexa had expected him to be. She supposed all the fiction she'd read had prepared her for a bold, yet strict leader who kept a tight reign on his crew. Norman was bold, but he had a much looser management style than a typical military man. Instead of lording over the crew and micromanaging them, he seemed to place himself among the fray and associate with them on a personal level at all times. His blond good looks and amazing smile made it easy for anyone to give him the benefit of the doubt and accept his leadership.

Zora Choi also had a good nature somewhat uncommon for a woman in her position. Alexa knew, though, from years of being friends the woman, that when it came time for seriousness, Zora had no difficulty in dropping her happy persona to be tough. Other than Gayle, the doctor was the only person on the ship Alexa knew before boarding that first time. In fact, after Gayle had conned her into taking a position, Alexa had done something similar to get her doctor friend to join the fun also. Zora, a born risk taker at heart, had been only too happy to expand her practice into space.

Alexa knew very little about Ricardo, the final occupant of the dinner table, other than that he seemed to be very thoughtful and knowledgeable about the ship. Not unlike her, he didn't seem to quite fit into the community forming among the rest of the crew. It didn't take a genius to guess that his white hair and weathering skin probably had a lot to do with it. She guessed that he was the oldest person on the ship.

Speaking high praises of the food, Norman had brought them to the Orbit Elite. The packed waiting area indicated that it was in demand among the space station citizens. Contrasting the realistic light of the station, dim lighting cast a gray haze throughout the dining room, and elliptical art covered the walls in between long mirrors. Diversely shaped tables filled the room, set with small candles and blood red table cloths.

"I know she's not coming," Norman said, sipping a glass of juice.

Alexa nodded. "Believe it or not, she is. You guys be nice to her."

Zora flipped her long, sandy hair over her shoulder. "I don't think we'll have a problem being civil if she is. Alex, I don't know her too well, but Gayle needs to lighten up."

"You got that right," the Captain said. "I don't need my ass torn off and handed to me again any time soon." He ran an exasperated hand through his blond hair.

Zora laughed. "Well, you deserved it. She had me so scared before we left that I thought I was going to throw up."

Shaking her head, Alexa laughed at the woman. She couldn't imagine Zora, who was six feet tall with a sturdy frame and a little extra weight, being anything less than completely composed. "You're both full of it. We've got things ironed out and I'm having a great time. Isn't it amazing that we are working on a space ship?"

Everyone nodded wistfully and Ricardo pointed past them with his hand. "I never thought I'd get out of Texas again, and now look at me. It's a pity more people don't get to experience it."

The older man, slightly weathered without looking ancient, always seemed a little sad to Alexa. Like now, there was usually a twinkle of tears in his eyes, and she could see a shadow of a memory there. "Yeah, it is," she said. "That's why we need to all go with the flow and not stress about the small stuff. We're all very lucky."

"Yeah, until we die in a fiery crash," the Captain added.

Alexa narrowed her eyes at him, but Norman didn't notice. His eyes were firmly locked on a woman seated at the bar nursing a drink. Dark hair fanned down her back in a silky wave just past her shoulder blades, which were exposed by the gaping maw at the back of her black dress. Actually, saying the outfit was a dress was a generous term, as it was mostly a tight black tube covering the woman's most sensitive, voluptuous parts. Alexa couldn't see her face, but she could only imagine that the woman was a stunning beauty.

"Captain, what are you looking at?" she asked, knowing the answer.

Zora's eyes tracked to the bar, producing a big laugh. "What a porcupine!"

Norman broke his gaze away momentarily to glare at her good naturedly. "I'm looking at some very interesting wildlife indeed."

"I was talking about you and your stiff little prick," she said, poking out her tongue.

The Captain shot her a crooked smile and turned back to his new paramour. "Say what you will, but with the prospect of being cooped up with you and your other little hens on that ship for the indefinite future, I think I'd be missing a prime opportunity if I didn't go say 'hi'."

With Gayle on the way, and not in the best of moods, Alexa did not like his idea. "Norman, you don't have time to woo any beautiful women right now. Gayle is on the way and we'll need to be back on the ship soon."

Straightening his shirt and belt, the Captain stood. "Who said I was going to woo anyone? I have something much less time consuming in mind,"

he said, winking at Alexa. Her mouth gaped open as he left the table on a course for the bar.

The doctor shook her head and lifted her drink toward the departing man. "Well, he has guts. I'll give him that much. We need to work on the placement of his brain, though."

"Ah, let the boy have his fun," Ricardo said, taking a sip of his soda.

Still listening to the conversation at the table, Alexa kept an eye on the Captain. She had a bad feeling about his little escapade. Something about the woman, simply her noble bearing, perhaps, spoke of peaks far higher than Norman Jones could ever hope to reach. Nonetheless, he sat down next to her, his smile as wide as the sun, and began talking.

"You could join him," Zora said to Ricardo. "I think you've got just as good a chance at scoring as junior there."

As his copper skin tinged red, Ricardo smiled. "I don't think so. I won't say I'm washed up in that department, but I know better than to try with a woman like that."

"Oh, I don't know. I hear that 65 is the average age of men on Genesis Station. Maybe that's what she's here for," Zora said.

Alexa didn't think so. The woman at the bar, whose cold eyes were watching the Captain with measured indifference, did not look like she had any need for an older man to take care of her. Norman gestured to her, no doubt professing the depths of her beauty, and elicited a small smile. While his attire did not profess of the elegance of his prey's, the informal uniform he and Gayle had concocted did give him a dignified military appearance. Norman had insisted upon having black in the outfit, which took form in black slacks and shoes. Gayle had insisted upon gray, adding a gray button-up shirt, long sleeves, with black trimming on certain seams. To signify his rank as captain, Norman also wore a matching black jacket.

Norman's smile broadened when he actually managed to get the woman to laugh. Alexa didn't think he was getting very far, though, as the posture of her body remained rigid. When her eyes again cut to the door, Alexa knew the bold young man did not have a chance, no matter how hard he wished it.

Zora poked a round finger in her friend's ribs. "Did you hear me? I don't think it would be a good idea to horn in on Norman's action."

"What?" Alexa asked.

The big doctor chuckled. "Take a picture, it would last longer."

Alexa shook her head and pushed her away. "I just don't think this is a good idea."

"Let him have his fun. We'll be back on the slave ship before long," she said.

Hearing a loud laugh by the Captain from the bar, Alexa raised her eyebrows in surprise to see his dark companion joining him in his jocularity. Her mouth parted slightly as she laughed, and her posture relaxed for the first time. Her delicate hand rested on the Captain's forearm as they both rocked on the tall barstools.

Caught in the moment, Norman leaned toward the woman as her dark eyes cut to the entryway, where a group of five men, several of whom wore short military haircuts and suspicious bulges at their hips, were stopped. The others wore black silk suits, their thin jackets ending just above their belts, with string ties hanging from the necks. Alexa had seen men like them often traveling on business during her years as a flight attendant. They were the kind who flew first class and resented the fact that the private jet was unavailable. They would not be happy about a reckless flyboy hitting on the woman they were meeting, and she seemed to know it too.

Norman whispered something to her at that close range, his mouth only inches from her ear. Before he finished, the woman sprang off of her seat and slapped him in the same motion.

"You cretin!" she yelled in an accented voice.

The Captain pulled back, shocked. Before he could stand, two goons from the group of men grabbed his arms as another began screaming something unintelligible into his face. The Captain began struggling, thrashing his body from side to side to no avail, his face a mask of confusion and anger as he was being dragged away.



Genesis Station was a marvel of modern science afloat in the sky, a massive structure visible from Earth as a reflective space hulk. The giant cylinder, five miles long and three miles in diameter, rotated constantly as it circled the planet in an orbit between the Earth and the moon. Inside, scientists had built an environment as close as possible to a tropical paradise, minus the rain and other worldly annoyances.

Gayle had always thought the place was a bit creepy, though. She had trouble being comfortable in a place that had no sky. The partly translucent hologram image that attempted to block out the strange sensation of looking up to see more ground did little to dim the impression. Even though she could not feel the fact that she was spinning, the business woman always felt like she would plummet to the other side of the compartment to her death at any moment.

The streets, which were little more than wide walkways since all motorized travel was done by trams or personal motorcraft, were lined with trees and flowers, and always populated by people. Even though the day cycle had been set to correspond with Earth Eastern Time and the lights were dimmed from nine p.m. to six a.m., the station's inhabitants had never abided by the clock. Most stores were open twenty-four hours and people roamed at all hours of the day.

All the little animals inhabiting the place didn't seem to mind and had apparently developed their own internal time clocks as well. At any given time, squirrels and parrots could be seen scampering about, free to explore without a care in the world. Since no natural predators had been introduced into the environment, the station had a resident gamekeeper who was responsible for thinning the animal populations and sending the overflow to Earth. The situation worked out well for the animals on the home planet as well, since their numbers were threatened constantly by human overpopulation and natural habitat destruction.

Gayle felt overdressed in her navy slacks and white silk blouse as she passed people milling about on her path. Some were dressed more formally, but the majority wore shorts or skirts, and there seemed to be a shortage of sleeved shirts on the station. Every time she visited the station she wondered if it would really be that wonderful living here, with no need to work and presumably nothing challenging to do. The inhabitants spoke glowingly about their life in paradise, though, and there was a waiting list to move aboard, so even if she did not find the idea enticing, plenty of people did.

Spotting the sign for the Orbit Elite restaurant, the business woman frowned at seeing one of her crew members standing outside. She wasn't quite close enough to see clearly, but Gayle thought the tall woman in the black and gray uniform was Alexa. Though the possibility existed that her friend was simply waiting to meet her, the fact that Alexa was pacing a small path in front of the door, wringing her hands, did not give Gayle much confidence that this was simply a nice gesture. Alexa was a bit of a worrier, but there usually was at least some root cause for her discomfort.

Gayle smiled as she approached, and Alexa, her shoulder length brown hair blowing in a simulated breeze, returned a grim grin. "Did you guys clean the place out?"

A nervous laugh tittered from her friend. "You could say that," Alexa said. The younger woman stepped forward and captured her friend's hands, bringing them together between them. "Gayle, we've got a problem, but I don't want you to freak out."

"Shit," Gayle said through gritted teeth. All she needed was another problem. "I have a feeling I'm going to freak out just a little. What is it?"

Round brown eyes turned away. "Norman got arrested."

"What?! You've got to be joking. And he's fired if you're not." Gayle pulled her hands away. "For that matter, you're fired if you are joking."

"Unfortunately, for him at least, I'm not joking. He started talking to this woman in the bar, and she slapped him, and then he got arrested," Alexa stammered.

Gayle put her hands on her hips, her fingers digging into her flesh. "Well, he had to do something more than that," she said, her voice a low growl.

Alexa shrank back a little, motioning with her hand for Gayle to follow. "I'm sure he did, but it couldn't have been much. They were at the bar, though, so I don't know what happened."

"Where are we going?" Gayle asking as her mind formulated all the ways she could kill her captain.

"To the jail. It's just a couple of blocks. I know you're mad, Gayle, but you need to let Norman tell his side of things. As far as I could tell, the only thing he did was talk to the woman," Alexa said.

“He’d better have a damned good explanation or I’ll be throwing his ass out the nearest airlock.” Gayle hated the way her anger bubbled to the surface so easily, but that was the one emotion she could never hide. Alexa had not had the opportunity to see her angry much, to her luck, and Gayle could tell she was showing a whole new side to her friend lately. Gayle would have to make it up to her later.

They walked the remaining distance to the station in silence, Gayle stalking along, her heavy footfalls bounding off the synthetic concrete. She would have missed the jail if Alexa had not grabbed her arm and pulled her down the sidewalk. The building, with a square face and blue tinted windows, looked more like a dentist office. A jail didn’t have to have a sinister appearance, but she had expected it to for some reason. Even if there was no dark shadow hanging over it, her mood would more than make up the difference.

The front door slid open as they neared, drawing a gust of air out of a prim and delicately furnished front lobby. Gayle wondered if Norman was the first prisoner ever held there. The place certainly didn’t look like it had to be used often. An older woman sat behind a glass window that was beside a single red door, the only other way out of the room. Looking up from reading something hidden out of sight, the woman adjusted her glasses as her visitors approached.

“May I help you,” she asked, her voice soft.

“Yes, I am told Norman Jones is here. I need to see someone about getting him out,” Gayle said. Noticing Ricardo and Zora sitting in uncomfortable looking plastic chairs against the back wall, Gayle shot them a sort warning look as Alexa joined them.

“Mr. Jones,” the woman said, her neutral expression turning dower. “Mr. Jones is in quite a bit of trouble, Miss.”

The businesswoman took a deep breath, trying to quell her desire to explode. She crossed her arms over her stomach to keep from tearing her hair out. As she began to speak, the red door opened, drawing both women’s eyes. A tall, dark skinned man stepped through, his face set in a hard clench. His hairless skull shimmered in the manufactured light, the reflection intensified by his height.

“Rad, long time, no see,” she said, but didn’t smile.

“My, my,” the man said in his high pitched Aussie accent. “Your ability to beautify a police station never ceases to amaze me.”

Gayle tightened her arms as the man moved toward her, but his infectious smile did not allow her to remain rigid. “How are you?” She opened her arms to him and they exchanged a brief hug.

Radeem Jarad, formerly Australia's first United States senator, had been a good friend to Rick. When most of the other politician's ignored her because of her and Rick's decision not to hide their relationship, Rad had welcomed her with a big smile. At the same time she and Rick were working to get the Gossamer Wings project going, Rad had been launching his own company. They had not spoken since just after the funeral, but she had heard he was doing well.

“I could do without keeping your employees from being killed, but other than that, I'm good. Are you about to go ballistic?” he asked.

She shook her head. “You know me too well. Do you know what's going on?”

“Sounds like your boy let his mouth overrun his brain,” he said.

“Shit!” Gayle clinched her hands together. “I'm going to murder him.”

Rad put a hand on her shoulder and guided her toward the door. “Just calm down. I think some savvy negotiations can get him out of this, but you need to reign in your normal obstinacy.”

Taking his advice to heart, Gayle followed the Senator and bit back on her anger. One among many flaws, her inability to hold her temper was one of her worst. She hoped that Rad would be able to use his influence to help her iron out this situation. If he did, Norman was going to have some serious questions to answer, and she had a decision to make.

Down the short hall past several offices on either side, they entered the booking area, which contained stations for scanning fingerprints, sampling DNA, and digital imaging. Though Norman was no where to be seen, a woman in a slinky black dress sat in a rolling chair, flanked by two muscled body guards and a skinny, wretched man that Gayle knew. Her blood boiled to the top again at seeing his smug face, a triumphant smile lighting his shifty eyes.

"Ms. Darwin. It looks like we are going to be departing later than expected," Gerard Oliver said.

He was nothing more than a spy and a saboteur, and Gayle had no problem admitting that she hated him. Gerard had been assigned to her ship by the Senate oversight committee to make sure that she lived up to their standards and complied with every clause of her contract. By the way he skulked around the ship, counting boxes and nitpicking the crew, she had to wonder what else he was there to do.

"A bit later," she said, keeping her voice even. "But we'll be underway shortly if I can get this mess straightened out."

The scantily clad woman stood and spoke in a French accent. "I do not know if this can be *straightened out*, as you put it." She pointed toward the hall that continued into the depths of the building. "That man assaulted me and should be punished," she said.

Rad stepped forward between Gayle and the woman, spreading his hands in supplication. "Gayle, this is Ivette Chirac. She is the French ambassador to the United League of Democracies. It seems she and Captain Jones had a bit of a misunderstanding."

The dark haired vixen shook her head. "It was no misunderstanding. Men do not speak to me that way!"

Gayle sighed. She knew Norman enough to know he'd probably come onto her with some cheap, vulgar line. He was a talented man with a commanding presence, but he tended to be like all men and often let other parts of his body do his thinking. She had witnessed his love of women during their time on Mars together and also after they were coordinating for the Gossamer Wings' first flight. This was the first time she had witnessed his recklessness getting him into real trouble.

"Ms. Chirac, I'm sorry if the Captain offended you, but I'm sure he didn't mean any harm. He loses his head when he sees a beautiful woman," Gayle said. Just by the way the woman carried herself, the business woman could tell that the Ambassador would appreciate a few well placed compliments.

Rad nodded and took a step toward Ms. Chirac. "That's exactly what I've been explaining to the Ambassador. Norman is a young man driven by passion. You can hardly blame him for expressing his desires to a

woman of such allure," he said. Gayle would have laughed at his selfless sacrifice of dignity if the situation weren't so dire.

"Yes, I hope you can forgive him," Gayle added.

The woman's dark eyes narrowed and she glanced back toward the back of the building. "I do not know. He is a disgrace."

Gayle shrugged her shoulders and nodded agreement. "I can't say I disagree, Ambassador. I can assure you, though, that he will be severely disciplined." Gayle stepped to within three feet of the woman's chair and tried to project a demeanor as submissive as possible. Internally, she was again devising ways to torture her captain. "If there is anything I can do to make this up to you, I would not hesitate for a moment to pay back your mercy on my employee. If I didn't need him to get the ship back to Earth, I can assure you that I would let him rot here."

Like a queen on her thrown, the Ambassador surveyed her subjects, determining if they were worthy of her grace. Gayle glanced back to Gerard, who stood to the side with a satisfied, cat-like grin on his face. She would have slapped him if it wouldn't have ruined her life.

"Because you are in need of him, I will not have him prosecuted. He must know, however, that if he ever so much as looks at me again, I will have his eyes gouged out and fed to him in a soup," she said. An elegant hand swished through the air in a guillotine motion.

Gayle smiled and thanked the woman. She hoped she would never see her again, and never be asked to repay this humiliating debt. Given how the last twenty four hours had gone, though, she didn't believe there was much chance of that good fortune.



Softening his steps and the resultant clang of his boots on the metal floor of the corridor, Norman Jones felt his muscles tense as he saw Gayle's chamber door. He stopped in front of it and took a deep breath that didn't lessen the churning in his guts. He screwed up big time and now he had to face the music. He wasn't one to shy away from owning up to his mistakes, but that didn't make the actual beating any easier.

Above all, Norman hated facing Gayle because he had disappointed her. The moment they had met on Mars, he had known that their future

was intertwined. Gayle, though a few years older, was an ideal compliment to him. They were both driven to reaching new heights for their future. Where he was rash and unpredictable, though, Gayle was measured and accurate. When he stepped over the edge, she was there to pull him back. Even knowing about his faults, she had taken him on and let him soar.

Falling back down to Earth didn't feel so good. Norman pushed the red call button on the key panel outside the door and said, "It's me, Gayle."

The door opened, a gaping maw filled with soft blue light that seemed to suck him in like a black hole. As he entered her outer office, he felt as if the pressure of the room was crushing him from the inside out. His boss, wearing a white silk shirt with her hair pulled back, sat behind her desk. Her cool blue eyes moved up to him as he stopped in front of her.

"Thank you for coming. Is everything running optimally?" she asked, her voice devoid of emotion.

They had departed from Genesis Station a half an hour before without incident after finally getting the entire crew aboard. Gayle had made them search for two missing crew members, stating that if she had to get the Captain out of jail for the trip, she wasn't leaving anyone else behind because they were caught up enjoying the beauty of the station. Her eyes had been blazing when she had said it, much like they were blazing now.

"No problems at all. The ship's running like a champ." Norman smiled and tried to appear unconcerned. "You wanted to see me?" Gayle had not said anything to him after getting him from the jail and he had no doubt now was the time for yelling.

Gayle cleared her throat. "Yes, I'm sure you know what this is about. I can't have you acting like that and working for me, Norman." She peered through him.

"I'm sorry, Gayle. It won't happen again," he said. He held his hands behind his back and stood at attention.

"It had better not. When I offered you this job, you and I had a nice conversation about how this was a job for a grown up, and that you were going to have to impose discipline on yourself," she said, her voice even and controlled.

The Captain wished she would scream at him. "I know. I slipped."

"You slipped?" she asked, her voice incredulous. "Norman, I'm not your commander. I don't plan on constantly being on your back to keep you in line. I hired you to be the leader of the crew on this ship. Everything you do, whether it is in the line of duty, or while you are on leave, impacts them. They are looking to you as a guide as to how to act and what kind of behavior is expected of them. You understand that, don't you?"

He nodded vigorously. "Yes, of course. I—"

Gayle held up a hand, and the iron expression on her face, her high cheek bones tinted light red, let him know he should not say anything further. "I'm not finished," she said, narrowing her eyes. "Not only does your behavior have an impact on the crew, it also influences how outsiders view this business. We've been operational for two days and we've had two major incidents." Gayle shook her head, her dark hair waving behind. "I don't have to tell you that we're not starting off with a good track record."

Norman sighed. He'd been trying not to think about it. The thought that what he had done on the first two days of his captaincy might have doomed Gayle's business to failure made him want to lie down and cry at her feet. He mutely nodded an acknowledgment to her statement.

Leaning forward onto the desk, Gayle took a deep breath and screwed up her face momentarily. "As your employer, I am telling you that if you screw up like this again, I will not hesitate to fire you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said in his best military voice.

She studied him for a moment as if she questioned his veracity. "Good," she finally said. Her shoulders relaxed a little, but her expression remained stern. "Now as your friend, I am telling you that if you do that again, I'll chop you up into bite sized pieces from the toes up. You get that?"

Norman appreciated her way of saying she wanted him to succeed. Gayle had always been behind him, if he could just keep his darker side from getting into the way. "Yes, Your Excellency," he said, whipping his hand to his head in a salute.

Finally, she smiled.