

Pirates

The Captain ran a weary hand through his unordered blond hair, then brought his fingers down to remove sleep from his eyes. Having insomnia while on a long trip, when his job was to mainly sit and monitor, was not a fortunate circumstance. He could already see himself a few hours from now, sitting at his station on the flight deck, his head bobbing as he drifted between useless sleep and even more useless wakefulness. Unfortunately, he'd been up most of the last two nights, and there didn't seem to be any reason, or anything he could do about it.

The Gossamer Wings was zipping through empty space toward Mars for the first time, and the crew and twenty passengers were along for the ride. Gratefully, nothing unusual had happened lately, and the Captain did not expect anything but smooth sailing. If he let anything go awry, he knew Gayle would have his head on a pike sticking out of the next patch of dirt she saw.

Norman wished looking out the window brought him comfort, but standing in the engine compartment, staring at the red metal hulk that was the antimatter converter worked just as well. Outside the ship stood only blackness. Movement of the ship could be observed by their motion in relation to distant stars, and of Earth growing smaller and smaller behind them. The lack of significant markers close by, though, gave him the eerie sensation that they were standing still, and the universe was moving around them. That thought was true enough, actually, but the Gossamer Wings was moving too. Just not in a way that made him feel the lullaby of power beneath his feet.

He knew he wasn't the only one. Ricardo was tinkering with the engine to while away his sleepless hours. Of course, he didn't need to be on as tight a schedule as Norman. The engineer did general upkeep during the day, but since they were well into their long flight, his main purpose was to be there in case of an emergency. So while Norman would have to be at his post in a few hours, supervising his crew and trouble shooting any problems on the entire ship, Ricardo could be snoring away in his cozy little cabin.

Ricardo, whose bronze skin almost glowed against his thick head of white hair, emerged from the door into the antimatter chamber. The opening sealed shut behind him, forcing air from the compartment in a metallic rush. Despite his professed weariness, the older man smiled, accentuating the textured canvas of his face.

“Loose bolt,” he said, holding up his wrench. “Sometimes it can take months to figure out a sound like that.”

Engines were about as interesting to Norman as a women's cosmetic convention. On both accounts, he didn't really care how they worked, as long as they looked pretty and revved high. “I'm glad I could help. Now if you want to be a great guy, come over here with that tool and bash me over the head. I need unconsciousness one way or another.”

Laughing, Ricardo moved beside him and leaned on the rail. Directly before him was a view into the engine chamber window. The life force of the ship consisted of a large, firetruck red cylinder that filled up the room. A chrome square in the middle housed a bevy of readings that were big enough to see from their vantage point.

“Let's not go to extremes. You need to get a sleeping pill. The Doc has something, I'm sure,” Ricardo said.

“That big woman scares me,” Norman said, shaking his head.

“She's a sweetheart. You just have to get to know her.”

Norman didn't know about that. All his interactions with Zora Choi had been peppered with dirty looks and semi-cruel jokes. “I'll take your word for it. If I don't start sleeping, though, I'll have to pay her a visit.”

The older man shifted his weight and clasped his hands together over the chasm below the scaffold where they stood. “Well, you should do something about it if you don't get relief soon. The last thing we need is our captain getting a case of space anxiety.”

The Captain waved him off. “You don't have to worry about that. I've made the Mars trip at least ten times, and in slower ships. My longest was six months.” He didn't think it was important to mention that many of his shipmates had gone a bit loopy during that trip. Being a drift with no possible safe port tended to make some people more than a little crazy.

“The ship should hold up fine for the next two months. There hasn't been a glitch yet,” Ricardo said.

“That's the target, old man. We like to keep you bored.”

Ricardo rolled his eyes. "Sorry, Captain, but this is the most fun I've had in years. But I will take a smooth trip."

"Hopefully you won't be disturbed. I think I'm going to go try to knock myself out." Norman leaned away from the railing and stretched his arms. "Don't call me unless the engine blows up."



Any job where he had the opportunity to order his boss around was alright as far as Norman was concerned. Gayle, whose scratchy voice sounded thick with sleep, had not sounded one bit happy that he needed her on the flight deck. Nine a.m. Earthtime was far too late to be sleeping anyway. At least to a longtime army man used to the five o'clock bugle to which he had awakened so many times. Even with the drag insomnia caused, he couldn't break the habit.

Though it wasn't above him just to wake Gayle as a joke, this was not one of those times. Out in the distance of space ahead of them, between Earth and Mars, the sensors had detected something unusual. If he had been the commander of an Army ship, there would have been no doubt that they would go investigate the anomaly. His position now, however, wasn't one of exploration or security. Gayle wanted to make money and it was up to the captain of the ship to facilitate that goal. Taking an unexpected detour out of curiosity would not likely make them any money, or get them closer to Mars. Still, he couldn't pass the situation without pointing it out.

At the sliding sound of the door behind him, Norman turned to greet his grumpy visitor. Dressed in a sand colored exercise suit, Gayle looked anything but alert, oriented, and ready to run. She had her dark hair pulled back severely into a ponytail and her brown eyes were painfully blurry.

"This had better be good," she said, descending the stairs.

Norman suppressed a laugh. "Thanks for coming. I don't know if it's good or not, but I wanted to bring it to your attention." He stepped toward the bank of monitors to the left and motioned her to follow.

Through the front window of the ship, they could see only the constant canvas of black ink dotted with shining specks. Luckily, they were able to use advanced camera technologies, sensors, and satellite imagery to pull

up the picture he needed. The captain pointed to a screen that featured two small metallic objects in the center. "This is peculiar," he said.

Gayle squinted and bent forward to get closer to the image. "What the hell is it?"

"It's two ships out in the middle of nowhere. It looks like one is docked with the other, but it's hard to tell."

After rubbing her eyes, Gayle looked back to him. "That is weird. I didn't think there was any traffic scheduled in front of us."

"There's not," he said. Since there were so few transport and military ships working in space, the schedule of operations were planned out for months in advance and rarely changed. There were a few other private transport companies, with no ties to the government, but they were supposed to register and log all of their routes also. "So the question here is do you want to do anything about this?"

The older woman raised a dark eyebrow at him. "We're not the police, Captain."

Norman held up a hand. "I know and that's not what I meant. It looks like both these ships are disabled. We're not picking up a significant heat signature for either one."

"We're not rescue rangers, either. Those ships could have been out there for years," she said.

"You know that's not true. We've both been through here on other ships, military ships, and they weren't there. This is new. If we pass them up, it will be weeks in the least until another ship goes by. If there are people on that ship, they could be dead by then. They could be dead in hours if they don't have any power," he said. He knew they had no obligation to check it out, but he couldn't imagine leaving anyone out there to die.

Gayle sighed and rubbed her eyes again. "They could be dead already," she said softly. The business woman bent forward again and looked at the ships. "How long will it take to check it out?"

"It will only take a half hour to get there. Not long at all. Mars won't miss us," he said, smiling.

“Okay, so we’re taking a detour. But if this turns out bad, I’ll be leaving you with those junk heaps.” After pointing a mock-threatening finger at him, Gayle retreated back toward her quarters.

Directing the navigation staff to change course, Norman moved to his station and sat in the ultra comfortable chair. Moving the ship to another direction took only a little more than the press of a button and he could have done it himself. When things were calm, like this, he would have no difficulty in flying the monster on his own. Of course, the reason for Gayle’s over caution, four people in control at all times, were those moments when things weren’t perfect.

His fingers tingled with anticipation for what they might find ahead. Either they would see two ships full of dead people, or they would be there to save the day. They might also learn that the ships were heading out on their own, and didn’t need the *Gossamer’s* help at all. Most importantly, though, he didn’t know what they would find, and that made any amount of waiting worthwhile.

Norman perked up as they were within three minutes of meeting the ships, noticing an energy spike on the readings. He called Gayle over the communications system to bring her back. The experienced Captain had an idea of what was going on with the ships, but he certainly hadn’t expected it. Since the population in dark space was pretty limited, marauders were not commonplace, though he had heard stories, most he’d only half believed.

Gayle moved in beside him without fanfare, and the Captain pointed to the monitor. “The smaller ship is almost powered up,” he said.

“Great. I guess they’re not all dead after all.” She smiled and nudged him in the shoulder.

The blond man shook his head and tapped the surface with his index finger, beating the suddenly alive ship. “That may be great for these guys, but I wouldn’t bet on the safety of the others,” he said. Just as he finished, the smaller ship zipped out of their field of view on a dead path toward Jupiter and the nothingness beyond.

Gayle’s blue eyes widened. “What the hell? Are you telling me they were pirates?”

“Something like that,” Norman said, walking around her to get back to his chair and computer. “I’ve heard of it happening before. I think the

attackers must have powered down in hopes we wouldn't notice them and move on." He began punching the keyboard and moving the pointer on his computer.

"I've been warned that there is a slight possibility that someone could attempt a robbery of the ship, but I had no idea that the threat was so real. How can they get goods back to anywhere without getting caught?" she asked incredulously, still standing near the monitor bank.

The Captain shook his head. "I don't know, unless they have found some way to manipulate the system. There's something special about these guys, though. Come take a look at this," he said.

When Gayle stopped beside him and crouched to get a good view of his monitor, Norman pointed to the scorch marks on the side of the remaining vessel. As they got closer, their ship's high powered cameras were able to get detailed pictures, even though they were still a thousand miles away. Black burn marks covered the nose of the ship, and a significant piece of the top tier of that section appeared to be missing.

"That ship had weapons," Gayle whispered.

Norman nodded. Not even military vessels had weapons. There was simply no need for them, nothing to be protected against that a laser would impact. "I don't know what we stumbled on, but it's definitely more than a break down."

"This is crazy. I certainly didn't sign up for this. Perhaps it's time the government get some armed patrols out here," Gayle said, straightening beside him. Her gaze drifted toward the front window and a million miles away.

"Nah, they'd rather spend their time harassing you," Norman said.

"Captain, I think I hear a faint distress signal coming from the remaining ship, but they're too damaged to broadcast the signal," Xang said from her station.

Norman acknowledged the young woman and then turned to Gayle, his look questioning. The reverse thrusters fired to either side of the ship, slowing it and putting slight pressure on their bodies. The faux gravitation field on the ship was able to suppress most of the effect, but he could still feel a drag, as if he were being whipped through the vacuum himself.

“Okay,” Gayle said, crossing her arms. “Get a team ready and board that ship.”



The debilitated ship, a modified military cargo style that had been out of production for fifty years, had been damaged more than Norman hoped. The dull gray interior walls matched the outside and there were none of the decorated comforts present in the *Gossamer*. Floating through the first two compartments let Norman know that whatever the ship was doing, it was a bare bones operation even before being robbed.

Most of the section they'd docked with, which appeared to be a cargo area, was severely damaged. When the pirates, or whoever they were, took the goods out of the area, they didn't care that they were ripping away the hull of the ship. Ricardo had managed to find a spot secure enough to attach to, but the Captain still feared they could float away at any moment. Wearing an environmental suit in open space always made him nervous. In his tour of duty in space, he'd seen more than one man lost on a repair mission, either fried by radiation or simply drifted away into the cosmos. With all the gaps in the ship, any one of his five men could share the same fate.

Norman squinted in the dim light provided by the emergency bulbs glowing overhead, trying to read the access panel for the next door. He pushed off the top of the door to get into a better position. Finally finding the simply labeled button, the Captain punched it and waited for the door to slide open. Back in this ship's day, the makers had at least recognized convenience. Judging by the environmental readings on the panel, the next compartments would be airtight, which was a good sign for any potential survivors.

Waiting for the compartment to seal, the Captain moved easily through the air to the next doorway. He didn't know how much damage had been done to the ship, but he had a feeling that even before being assaulted, the vessel had been a piece of flying space junk. However many people were in its crew, they could not have included a janitor. Each time he touched the wall, Norman expected his hand to come away covered in sludge.

As the next door opened, the Captain grasped the doorframe and pulled his body through. The erratically flashing lights over head hit off several people to his right, and he immediately regretted his overeager, unsafe

actions. He saw the muzzle of a gun flash red in front of him, standing out only by its bursting intensity in the sudden mass of confusion. Norman kicked off of the structure behind him hard to the left and down, knowing that he had some time to move in the vacuum before a decelerated bullet could hit him. If he didn't get out of the way, though, slow or not, the force of the shot would be as damaging as if it had happened on Earth.

The Captain turned onto his back as he hit the floor, seeing the bullet pass overhead in the disco lights bouncing around the large compartment. It appeared they had entered another cargo bay, and this one was full of people. His eyes, no doubt wide and wild, searched out a stocky man at the front of the group of what appeared to be ten or fifteen.

"Don't fire! We're here to help," Norman yelled. His voice came out muffled and frantic, reverberating like a lost echo inside of his helmet.

The man appeared to hear him, and took a step closer. "Who the hell are you?" he asked, still pointing the gun at him.

Norman remained on the floor in hopes of looking as unthreatening as he was given his lack of weapons. "I'm Captain Norman Jones of the *Gossamer Wings*. We're a transport ship, but we saw you out here and thought you might need some help."

The man came closer still and Norman could see a weathered expression that spoke of a trial of the spirit. He was unshaven, his beard matching his wild black hair in their dire need of washing. The man, who was five foot eight at best, filled out his dusky green pilot jumpsuit fully, mostly with muscle judging by his box square shoulders. Caramel brown eyes, stormy in the strobe lighting, stared at the prone man before him.

"Too little, too late."

"Yeah, I wish we could have been here sooner," Norman said. Feeling the tension ease slightly, he pushed off the floor to stand.

Shrugging, the shorter man finally lowered his gun, which looked like an old Colt. "Me too, but you would have been chewed up too. Sorry I tried to shoot you. Name's Cooper Gray," he said, putting out his hand.

The Captain suppressed a sigh and he reached out with his gloved hand, surrounding the shorter man's bare one, shaking it firmly. Cooper Gray looked exotic and plain, all at the same time. His Jet black hair, despite its

mess, fairly flowed coming from his shining copper skin. His bright eyes, the color of winter wheat, looked oddly out of place. Norman could not place what nationality he might be. Most likely, the man was like most of Earth's population, an amalgamation of all races and origins.

"No problem. Is anyone hurt?" Norman asked.

Cooper glanced over his shoulder. "Yeah, there's a few in the back. There's a few more beyond that that can't be helped."

Norman winced, knowing the pain of losing a shipmate. "I'm sorry to hear that. We'll do what we can. Let's transfer everyone to the *Gossamer* and the doctor can take a look at them."

Cooper didn't object, but his eyes remained distant, an angry fire still burning beneath the surface. Norman couldn't blame him. He didn't have to know a lot about the man to know that he had pride, and that pride had been raped by the marauders who had ravaged the ship. In addition to killing several crewmen, they had damaged the vessel so much so that repair would be impossible. They'd barely left enough to be recycled for parts.

Getting the remaining people off of the ship took longer than Norman had hoped, and by the time it was done, sweat was pouring down the inside of his suit, saturating the porous lining and creating puddles in his boots. They only had ten environmental suits, two of which had to be worn by rescuers, so only eight of the refugees could transfer from ship to ship at a time. Of course, they had taken the time to gather some of their personal belongings and say goodbye to their fallen home. In all, the ship had been a floating home to eighteen people, none of whom had had a good day.



Gayle gently placed the stack of invoices on her desk, then rubbed her hands across her face. She was beginning to realize that owning a transport company, especially one not making much money, meant she had to wear many hats whether she knew what she was doing or not. Owner, accountant, marketer, lobbyist, sometimes she forgot which function she was performing and when. She could only hope that she did all her jobs at least adequately. Rick Malloy had run her through the ringer enough times while she had been his intern that she should have had adequate general knowledge to get along.

Leaning back in the leather chair, using her feet to swing it from side to side, Gayle thought about her former lover, as she did often. Had he not died, all of this would be so much easier. The hassles with the government would be less, she would have more back up capital than she would ever need, and he would be there to help dictate the business aspect of the transport company. The woman, who had a degree in business herself, knew she was capable of keeping the ship afloat, so to speak, but having his input and agreement would be so precious to her. Rick had a different way of thinking about the world, and was the kind of person that could infect anyone with fresh ideas.

Glancing around the empty, gray walls of her bedroom and office, Gayle knew that there was a second reason she missed Rick. She had loved him, in her own way, and he had gone and left her alone. All she had now was a giant ship and a handful of people she considered friends. And even with those people, she had to try to keep them at a distance because they were her employees. There weren't any pictures tacked to the walls because her life had been devoid of the kind of moments when taking a photo seemed appropriate. She didn't have knick knacks on the stand beside her bed because she had never taken the time to develop a taste for one kind of collectible or the other, and no one had cared enough to find one for her. The bed was a comfortable full size because it was unlikely she would ever need more room.

The surly, dark woman looked at the bed and the occupant curled up beneath the blanket, and thanked the stars she had at least one thing to smile about. If she was only able to make one commitment her entire life, Gayle was glad she had at least been able to make one to him. Her mother would have been happy enough to keep him and his constant whining would have eventually tapered off. There was something about the little man, though, that Gayle knew she needed. She knew it had to be the unconditional, unending love he so casually doled out.

Gayle stood and walked to the bed, plopping onto the surface and landing beside the large lump in the middle. She pulled the covers back and looked at the sleeping dog, his face nearly touching his toes as he reclined in a tight ball. His eyes didn't open, but she knew he was awake. Using one of his long Basset Hound ears, the woman covered his face and bent to give his dark forehead a gentle kiss. The dog sighed softly, his deep chest expanding beneath her hand. His course black coat had more and more specs of tan in it, the only discernable measure of his age.

Rick had given her the demur little puppy four years ago, a black bundle of ears and belly that she had not even asked for. She supposed Rick saw it as a way to occupy her time when he could not be around, which was most of the time. Gayle had been furious with him. The lecture she gave him about not giving pets as gifts had only been half as long as her diatribe after he'd told her the pup was a clone. She had been creeped out by the thought at first, but he was so cute and sweet, she couldn't help but fall in love with him. In honor of his heritage, she named him Fifty, because he was the fiftieth offspring of the original dog.

Loving the little animal had been much more encompassing than she had imagined. After spending so much time working to make this dream a reality, being able to come home to his wagging tale and complete devotion was an untellable relief. When she had to be away from him, Gayle missed him terribly, though she would never tell anyone. Now that the transport business was in full swing, she planned to keep him on the ship as much as possible. The crew looked at her like she was a lunatic as she walked with Fifty around the ship, but they liked him too, so it worked out.

The door chime busted through her thoughts like a hammer, bringing the realities of work back to the forefront, where she knew she let them linger too often. Giving the dog another kiss, she pulled the cover back over him and crossed the room. She considered harassing Norman over the intercom, but instead pressed the button on her desk to let him into the chamber.

He had told her he'd be bringing Cooper Gray to meet her after the new passengers had a chance to get settled. Luckily for them, the *Gossamer* had enough empty rooms on this trip to accommodate them easily. As the men walked in, Gayle thought the newcomer looked more like a loading dock worker than the captain of a ship. His midnight black hair was slicked back, likely still wet from a fresh shower. He was small, but at the same time seemed to fill the room. His muscles were clearly developed, covered only lightly by a thin layer of padding.

"Hello, gentlemen," she said, extending her hand to the newcomer. He took it, and she noticed that his hands were large and callused, swallowing hers whole.

The man nodded, his mouth a grim smile. "Nice to meet ya. Cooper Gray. You Gayle Darwin?"

"I am. I see you've already been warned about me," she said.

Cooper looked to the Captain with a less than amused expression. "Could say that. I knew of your name before today, though. Got to keep tabs on the high priced competition."

Gayle had expected him to be upset, and she thought he looked it, but the lilting tone of his voice was somehow calming. "Is that what you were doing out here? Transporting?" She put out a hand and led them to the couch, which covered the wall opposite the computer area, where everyone sat, each man on the ends and Gayle in the middle.

Cooper shook his head as he settled into the padding. "That was the plan. Guess those days are over."

"We didn't see your ship listed as being on a run through here," Gayle said.

The dark man shrugged. "Must have been a mistake. We were on our way to Mars with a full load."

Gayle couldn't imagine how it would feel to lose her ship in such a violent fashion. She hoped he didn't own it. "Do you know who they were?" she asked.

The man's jaw clenched and fire flared anew in his strange eyes. If the people who had destroyed his ship had been in the room, they wouldn't have had a chance to survive his melting glare. "No, and they weren't the same ones as last time."

Gayle's jaw dropped and a scene of her ship being pillaged by masked bandits ran through her head in fast forward. The possibility had not even realistically crossed her mind the day before. Now she could see that life in distant space was not as calm as the government made it seem. The pirates had no place to hide, but apparently they found a way. The more important question was why such attacks were allowed to happen.

"I can't believe there are robberies out here. All traffic is supposed to be monitored," she said.

Cooper laughed deep in his big chest. "All is right in the Fed's world. Nothing but a big lie."

The Captain stiffened on Gayle's other side. "I don't believe that the government has anything to do with what happened to your ship. I saw

the other ship and it wasn't military issue," he said. His slimmer frame betrayed the defensive posture he tried to keep out of his words.

The dark man shrugged. "Believe what you will. That wasn't a government issue ship, mayhap not even a secret military one, but somewhere in its pedigree there's a stamp of approval and a government credit."

The government, at least the current administration and probably many before it, had a reputation for getting what it wanted by any means. In this case, there didn't seem to be any reason to rob and pillage registered ships when it had the power to regulate and tax them.

Gayle turned sideways, blocking Norman and his negative energy from view. "Cooper, what did they want from your ship? It couldn't have been just a government sponsored robbery."

He steeped his fingers together in his lap and tapped his thumbs against each other. "Don't know. We had some valuable personal property we were transporting, but nothing that special. The bastards didn't bother to let me know what their goal was. Got the idea they didn't find it, though. I heard them say something about artifacts."

Standing, Gayle paced across the small space to her computer desk, then back in front of the sofa. None of the story made sense, but she supposed it didn't matter. Knowing that they were looking for artifacts, though, made her wonder what might be in her latest cargo. "Well, for whatever reason they were there, at least we got you and most of the crew out alive. If you have everything out of your ship, we're ready to go," she said.

The two men remained seated on the couch, an uncomfortable chasm between them. Cooper nodded. "We have everything. I'll have to see if I can sell the carcass for scrap before someone steals that too." The hurt, angry shades in his eyes intensified again.

"To Mars it is, then," Gayle said, turning to her captain, issuing an implied order he understood completely.



The advancement of food storage and condensing methods had allegedly come a long way from the original space flights. If so, Gayle felt

very sorry for anyone who had been forced to subject themselves to something less appetizing than the slop on her plate. The mashed potatoes were edible despite being lumpy and super glue sticky. Butter worked wonders on almost anything. The sirloin steak, though, tasted almost as much like cardboard as it looked. Since she was the ultimate authority over such things, Gayle thought that for the next Mars trip, they would at least pack a fair number of uncondensed steaks.

Gayle glanced around the dining hall, noticing that no one else looked especially excited to be eating either. When all the chairs were in the room it looked considerably smaller than the entertainment arrangement. The maroon walls also contributed to the closed-in feeling, but the color calmed her. Though all of the excitement seemed to be over now, it never hurt to have a bit more peace.

On the other side of the room, Gayle spotted Cooper Gray going through the short food line. She was somewhat surprised to see that none of his shipmates were with him. If something like his ordeal had happened to her, the business woman couldn't imagine how she would react. She didn't think she'd want to be alone, though.

When Cooper began looking for a table, his eyes locked on Gayle and he immediately walked to her. The woman imagined that she looked as pathetic as he did, the leader of her little world, all alone in its grandeur. He asked if he could join her and Gayle happily agreed, if suddenly a little self-conscious. Cooper sat down across from her, then took his plates from the plastic tray used to courier them to the table. Like her, he would be eating stiff cardboard and sticky potatoes, with a side dish of dry chocolate cake.

"This looks great," he said, picking up the serrated knife.

The dark-haired woman chuckled. "Looks can be deceiving. I think I'll put a little more money in the budget for food for our next Mars mission."

Cooper took a bite of the meat into his mouth, chewing it roughly as needed, and moaned low in his throat. "I think this is excellent. Reminds me of home," he said.

Gayle stared at him in shock, wondering if that home had been in a cave somewhere, and if his typical food intake consisted of raw buffalo. Anyone liking this meal was hard to imagine. "Where are you from, Cooper?"

The stocky man chewed for a few moments, then shrugged. "Don't know if I can really claim any place as home now. I've been flying around in that ship for years. I was born and raised in Oklahoma, U.S.A. You?"

"I was raised in Dallas. It's been a long time since I was there, though. I've lived in Washington since I went to college," she said. The last time she had been in Texas to visit her parents, she'd made a visit with Fifty to one of the nature preserves there. The park had a small forest of native trees, an area of natural grasslands, and a large, fully stocked pond. It was one of only a few remaining natural preserves left in the country. In comparison to Washington, it was a stress-free paradise.

"Don't know how you stomached living there. Since they kicked out all the common people, the place is filled with snakes. Can't stand politicians," he said, then took another eager bite of his dinner.

Despite her work for an extremely popular elected leader, Gayle understood his sentiment. Because many people believed that the will of the electorate had become secondary to the desires of the men and women in office, faith in politicians to uphold their oaths had slipped greatly. Some people even questioned whether elections were only a ruse to placate those who might protest a change from democracy to dictatorship.

"They're not all bad," she said, staring down into her half eaten food. "But I can't say I'm sad to be spending time away." She watched him chew his food as he nodded. "Though if we're going to get hijacked out here, I'm not sure if this is what I signed up for."

Cooper looked up and she followed his eyes, which seemed to hold shadows she did not understand. "Government doesn't talk about the problems out here, but it's not so peaceful. What happened to my ship happens a lot. Usually not so bad, though."

"I didn't know a ship could be built with weapons," Gayle said, feeling like the naïve fool she obviously was.

"Could have been a military ship turned bad, or just a modification. It seemed different, though. It wasn't like any ship I've seen before."

Gayle shook her head. "You said they were looking for some kind of artifacts, so it wasn't just some sort of random robbery. Is that normal?"

His thick shoulders shrugged. "Not in my experience. Nothing out here is normal," he said.

"I think I might have what they were looking for. We have some stuff destined for the museum on Mars," she said.

Cooper laughed. "So they probably thought my ship was yours. That figures."

"I'm sorry you lost your ship." Gayle ran a hand through her hair.

Cooper shrugged again. "Not your fault. I just hope the museum likes its new pieces. As for me, I'm outta business and three of my people are dead."

Gayle could conjure no words to take the sting out of those facts. Thinking about the perils they all now faced, the pair finished their dinner in silence.