

Illegal Immigration

Gayle squatted down between two huge storage containers, looking at the cargo manifest and calculating the inventory one more time. The credit she received from the government against her loan depended on trips made rather than the quantity of items that she shipped, but she needed to keep close track of everything nonetheless. Perhaps she could use an impressive retention record in an advertisement somewhere down the line.

The cargo bay felt muggy and hot, though she knew that the humidity was at the same controlled level at which the computer kept the entire ship. She supposed that the closed in feeling that the columns of cargo gave her added to her own temperature and moisture level, rather than that of the ship. The bombardment of artificial light from overhead also contributed to the sensation, beating down as brightly as a clear summer day.

Shuffling feet caught her attention and she turned toward the sound in time to see Cooper Gray emerge into her row with his own clipboard in hand. Over the last few weeks she had spent a lot of time with the man and enjoyed most of it greatly. He was direct and honest, with a strange sense of humor that made her laugh more than she expected. She did not look forward to seeing him leave tomorrow when they docked on Mars.

“Cargo looks good. Managed to save more of mine than I thought, so at least I’ll be able to collect enough credits to get back to Earth,” he said, stopping beside her and leaning his thick shoulder against one of the crates. “You have a good storage system on this ship.”

Gayle smiled and leaned on a box in the opposite row. They’d been in the bay for an hour making the last minute safety and count checks. “Thanks, but I didn’t design it. One of Rick’s hired hands did the work on this ship. He wanted it to look like an old shuttle, but be ten times as big. I always liked the historic look about it.”

“Yeah, it has some character. You got a great thing going.”

She could see in his eyes that he was thinking about his ship again, and the unlikelihood that he would ever be able to get another one. They hadn’t talked about what he was going to do now that his lifelong business was demolished, but she got the idea that prospects were bleak.

She didn't suppose there were many captainless ships floating around the solar system. And it wasn't like he had powerful connections to get him into such a position, even if there were.

"I can't argue with you there. Sometimes I think about how different my life would have been if I'd never been hired by Rick, and I shudder to think about it. I'd be a pencil pusher in Washington, I suppose," she said.

Cooper laughed, images obviously playing behind his lively caramel eyes. "On your way to the presidency, I think," he said.

Gayle laughed too, but secretly acknowledged that he might have been right, once upon a time. Living in the White House had been a fantasy of hers during her high school years, the thought of wielding that much power and influence leading to more thoughts of how she could make her mark on the world. After working in the Washington political machine for a few years, though, she had come to understand that being president wasn't everything, and it certainly didn't guarantee that you could do good things.

"I don't know," she said, and pulled her cargo list up so that she could read it again. "I'm going to have twice as much freight on my way back to Earth. Quite a few passengers as well. I just hope the return trip is much less eventful. I don't think I'll have room to pick up another ship full of hitchhikers," she said, expecting him to smile.

Instead, Cooper's face turned troubled and he looked away. His body stiffened as he rubbed a hand over the stubble on his cheeks. "Look, there's something I've got to tell you."

Mirroring his posture, the businesswoman straightened, both hands grasping the clipboard in front of her. "I don't like the sound of that."

He shook his head. "Shouldn't." Without the smile she had seen so much recently, Cooper looked formidable. "The boxes you picked up from my ship weren't the only cargo I was carrying," he said.

Gayle looked over his head, as if the column of crates didn't block her view, toward his freight not visible on the other side of the room and tried to grasp his meaning. "I don't get it."

"Had five crewmen on my ship," he said.

The businesswoman shook her head. "No, we have seventeen people from your ship."

Cooper bit his lower lip. "Right. And I had five crewmen. Rest were on their way to Mars as passengers."

Flames began to lick her face as she realized what he was saying. "There weren't any passenger transports scheduled to Mars. Are you telling me that you are smuggling these people onto the planet?"

"Yes," he dipped his head in a short nod, and Gayle thought she could see a shamed slump in his shoulders, but she wasn't sure. "Thought you should know."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She had befriended him and his crew, and he had been lying to her all along. Now her ship was in danger of being associated with another scandal and there was nothing she could do about it. Tomorrow they would arrive on Mars and have to explain a ship full of extra people, most of who probably would not check out as approved for interplanetary travel. Her favorite senator would get a real kick out of this little escapade, no doubt.

"You're damn right I should know," she said, not trying to keep her voice lowered. "I should have known from the beginning. Hell, you shouldn't be smuggling people and we wouldn't have to deal with this!"

"Not everybody has such an easy time in this business as you. I do what I have to."

Gayle took a step toward him, her fists clinched around the cargo manifest. "You didn't have to lie to me, did you? Do you have any idea what kind of dilemma this puts me in? When I inform Mars customs about your criminal activity, even if they believe that I'm not involved, this will get back to Washington and I'll have a lot of explaining to do."

Cooper stood stock straight before her, unthreatened by her anger. "Don't tell anyone, then. I can get these people through without anyone knowing the difference," he said.

With a bitter laugh, Gayle turned toward the exit and began walking. "I have to tell them. If I don't, that will eventually come out too, and then I will actually have committed a crime." She stopped and looked back to him. "Thanks for putting me in this situation, Cooper. You should have just kept your mouth shut," she said.

As she continued out of the bay, her raging fire turning into depressed sadness, Cooper said only, "Thought you should know."



The lights overhead were set at medium dim, casting only thin shadows over the bedroom portion of Gayle's quarters. She reclined on the bed with Fifty snuggled into her side, stroking the dog's head and back thoughtlessly, giving comfort and getting the same in return. Coming to a decision about Cooper's revelation had been a harder decision than she would have imagined. She knew what the "right" thing was, but the problem was so much deeper than right and wrong. Yet again the universe had thrust a seemingly simple problem upon her, the reaction to which would probably shape the rest of her life.

She looked at the digital clock mounted next to the communications monitor. It was mid-morning now, a few hours after she'd inventoried the cargo. Since then she had been either pacing in front of the bed, or lying on it, struggling with her conflicted thoughts. Finally, she decided that she needed input from some outside source. A decision had to be made so that they could start preparing for the inevitable aftermath.

When the com sounded the Captain's arrival, Fifty lifted his dark head to acknowledge the sound without getting up. After settling into his weird new life on the ship, the dog had decided that visitors to her room were nothing to get excited about. Gayle gave him a final kiss on the head before rising and beckoning Norman.

"Where's that dog?" he asked as she directed him to her couch.

"He's not *that* dog, and he's napping," she said, pointing toward the bed. Fifty was actually sitting on the bed, alert and ready to come if needed, or if he thought food or attention might be forthcoming. Given Norman's typical behavior, he probably wasn't getting any good vibes.

The blonde man sat down softly on the leather sofa, his elbows on his knees and his bottom teetering on the edge of the cushion. "So, what's going on?"

Gayle could tell that he was still upset by the airlock episode. His pride had been stung by Cooper's spontaneous rescue of the suicidal crewman, and then probably by the swiftness with which Gayle had

forgiven the newcomer. Norman could hold a grudge as well as anyone, and he seemed to have an attitude toward Cooper. Gayle thought that perhaps she should have been more weary of Cooper as well, and they might not be in this dilemma.

"I need to talk to you about Cooper and the huge problem we now have," she said, sitting down beside him.

The Captain ground his teeth together at the sound of the man's name. "Are you two unable to conceive and need me for artificial insemination?"

An unstoppable scowl took over her face. "Norman, don't be childish. I have been enjoying Cooper's company as a friend and that's all. We are in the middle of a trip to Mars with nothing but black sky all around us. I know all the crew and most of them are scared of me. He's been an interesting distraction." Waiving her hand, she moved her legs and straightened her back, trying to shake the uncomfortable feeling that haunted her. "More than half of the people Cooper brought on this ship are smuggled cargo. He was taking them to Mars illegally," she said.

"What?!" Norman shouted. His hands balled into fists at his knees. "That bastard. I'm turning him in the minute we step foot on Mars."

"Now wait up a minute," Gayle said, placing her hand over one of his, then patting it comfortingly. "We have to slow down and take a rational look at this problem and decide what to do. My first reaction was the same as yours."

The Captain bolted from the couch and turned back to face her. "It's not a reaction, it's right. We can't allow any illegal activity on this vessel."

Gayle leaned back to look at his angry face, which was beginning to turn a bright shade of red. "I agree completely. We don't condone illegal activity. The problem is that he is here already and we have to consider our options."

"What options? We turn him in to the authorities," Norman said. The incredulous look on his face made it clear that he did not see any alternatives, or why Gayle was even considering not telling the police.

"Sit down, Norman, and let's talk," she said, her voice imploring, rather than commanding, him to do her bidding. After a moment and a deep, hesitant breath, the furious man sat back down. "Okay. First option is to

turn him in. Let's think about what happens if we do. Possibility one is that the authorities hail us for doing the right thing."

"That's right," the Captain said, slapping his hand down on his knee with a smack.

"Of course, with my fan club in Washington, I think that's not likely to happen. I think that when Senator Gardner hears about this, he'll see it as me being involved in some smuggling ring. There will be another investigation and, without doubt, it will be another black mark used against me in the future," she said.

Looking slightly deflated, Norman didn't say anything.

"The second option is to help him get these people off the ship undetected." She held up a hand to keep the Captain from speaking. "If we do that and he gets caught, we can claim we didn't know and hope the story holds up. There will be an investigation and a black mark. The other possibility is that we help Cooper and everything works out great, then we're in the clear."

"It's not right," Norman said with a child's pout.

Gayle shook her head and sank further back into the sofa. "No, none of this is right, but it's necessary. I can't decide what to do because I want to turn him in like I know we should, but the only way out of this clean is to help him." She touched his hand again and spoke from the heart. "You know that we can't afford any more bad press in Washington, Norman. Much more and you're going to be unemployed and I'm gonna be filing for bankruptcy."

She wouldn't normally discuss business with him specifically, but he already knew that despite the shiny new ship, the Gossamer Wings Transport Company wasn't the richest business in the world. Their success depended on keeping the politicians who decided much of their fate happy, whether anyone liked it or not.

Gayle pulled herself forward, putting her elbows on her knees and leaning her chin down on her hands. "Give me some help here, please."

"You want me to give you my blessing to help him," he said.

With a sigh, Gayle said, "Yes. Yes, I do."

After what seemed like several minutes of silence, she lifted her head to look at Norman, who still stood in front of her, his body rigid with indecision. His blue eyes bore into her and she could almost see his mind working behind them, fighting with what his heart wanted, and what the rest of his being told him to do. She hated herself for not being strong enough to come to a decision on her own, but she could tell that he hated her more for making him be the final arbiter.

"Fine. Let's help him," he finally said. His eyes held steady with hers, but the hardness never left.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because all you said is true. And because that's what you want. No other reasons," he said.

Norman wanted to say more. He wouldn't, she could tell, perhaps he couldn't. Something in him, though, was fairly beating against the inside of his skin trying to assert itself. She had what she needed, however, and she didn't really want to hear the rest. "Good. Let's help him, then."



The Gossamer Wings had been designed as a luxury vessel, but that didn't mean that every space on the ship had all the finest amenities. Cooper, as well as the remainder of his shipmates, had been placed in the extra crew quarters, which were as Spartan as the ship got. The room measured eight feet by eight feet, and featured only a single occupancy bed and a small desk. A clothes closet ended the little cube with a dresser in the bottom and a rack for the crew's finest clothes at the top. Gayle knew the crew hated their little boxes, but they would really have disliked them if Rick had had his way and put in bunk beds to make them two man rooms.

She walked in as the door slid into the wall in response to Cooper's call. He was sitting on the bed, taking up most of its width with his frame, his back propped against the cold gray wall. The plain brown blanket on the bed looked like it provided little warmth or comfort beneath him. The downtrodden look on his rounded face gave the same impression.

"Hello, Cooper," she said softly.

He merely nodded his head and motioned her to sit down.

Gayle took his offer, surprised by the softness of the mattress. She wondered if the decreased weight they experienced in space lent to the firmness of the fabric. "We need to talk about our little problem."

"Our problem?" he asked, his eyebrows rising.

"Yes, our problem. Problems, more like it. You have no idea how bad of a time this is for me to get mixed up with a people smuggling operation."

Cooper bowed his head and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't have a choice and it's too late to do anything about it now."

"I know. At this point, we've just got to figure out how we're going to get this accomplished without anyone finding out," she said. His eyes came up and, though his face didn't show it, there was a smile there. "Why in the hell do these people want to be smuggled onto Mars anyway? Don't they know it's just a big mining colony?"

The thick man sat up straighter. "Most of them realize that, yeah. Some are just running from something and think they can be anonymous. Some think they can make a buck. The rest are probably political refugees looking for a new start."

"You know, I must be the most naïve person in the solar system. I had absolutely no clue any of this type of thing went on," she said. Gayle wanted to slap herself on the forehead for emphasis of her stupidity, but she resisted the urge.

Cooper genuinely smiled now. "You shouldn't be surprised by anything after this. On Earth, or anywhere, if there is a person willing to pay for a service, there is someone to provide it."

"So is smuggling your main job?" she asked, still not comfortable with the idea that she was harboring fugitives. She shifted on the bed, scooting so that the wall supported her back.

"Not anymore," he said, shrugging. "I ran mostly legitimate cargo on my ship, but I had to under price the big operations like yours so much that I couldn't make much money. Anyone willing to travel at my price probably couldn't get approval to live on Mars anyway. Even though I didn't do it every trip, I made the most money off under the table jobs."

Gayle nodded, hearing a measure of sadness in his voice. From what she knew of the former captain, he was a man whose life had not gone as planned. "So, do you have any idea how we are gonna pull this crime off?"

"Might have thought up a plan or two," Cooper said, tilting his head as he looked to her.

Suddenly realizing she was sitting on a bed with a man, a place she hadn't been in a while, Gayle felt a need to pull away. She crossed her arms over her chest. "Lay it on me," she said, trying to ignore her less than businesslike thoughts.

"When we get to the planet, Mars will want a log of your crew. Otherwise, they don't get too picky about counting people. I think our best bet will be to get my people to blend in with your crew," he said.

"What about the crew logs? We've already sent them with our initial manifest," she said.

"Things change on a trip like this. We give them an updated list and they won't question, but that may not even be necessary. You're crew won't be up for the same scrutiny as would a person planning to stay on Mars. Same for mine, though we'll have a few more questions to answer," he said. The man sounded like he had thought the plan through more than once.

Taking a deep breath, trying to clear away her doubts, Gayle nodded. The strategy seemed sound, at least as far as getting the extra passengers to the planet's surface. If they were caught, there would certainly be no explaining it away, but at this point, she was beyond going back.

"Okay, but once we're there and unloading the cargo, you are on your own. I won't be able to help you," she said. Even with the turmoil he'd revealed today, the businesswoman still hated to see Cooper go.

His face cracked into a boyish smile again. "No problem. At that point, we'll just fade into the crowd."

Gayle scooted up to the edge of the bed, both hands gripping it beside her legs. "Good," she said, her voice soft.

Cooper moved beside her, leaning in so that his shoulder lightly brushed hers. "Gayle, I won't let you down. No one will figure this out. Got a surprise for them," he said.

Looking into his sunset eyes, she almost believed him.



The nearly imperceptible thrum of the Gossamer Wings shifted as the rear thrusters pivoted into place, firing to slow the ship for its final approach to the Mars docking station. Through the window of the flight deck, the station grew larger, its three giant elevators flanking two administrative modules. The entire structure was twice the size of the ship. The unique aspect of the space station was that it was tethered to Mars by the three cables that provided a path to the surface for passengers and cargo. Several failed attempts had been made to simulate the Earth space elevators before the Martian atmosphere and weather had been sufficiently mastered. Apparently, there hadn't been an accident in years.

The Captain contacted the control section to check in and get final instructions, then supervised attachment to the floating cargo transports from the flight deck. It wasn't a particularly difficult operation, but there was no harm in making sure the first time went well. And besides, he had no interest in hanging out with Gayle and Cooper any longer than necessary.

Understanding what the businesswoman was doing, and accepting it as right were two different things. Norman knew that the only way they would get out of this unscathed would be to get the refugees off of the ship undiscovered. Being complicit in the actual deception increased their risk of negative consequences, but Gayle really had no other choice. The fact that she had sided so easily with Cooper made Norman want to punch the man's lights out.

After the pilot docked the ship firmly in place, Norman set out for Cargo Hold Two to meet with the others. He didn't strictly need to be there since Gayle was going to the surface, but the more people running around to create confusion would make their chances of success all the better. He still didn't quite understand how Cooper could create enough confusion to lose 15 people without anyone noticing, but by nature, the man had to be more experienced in deceit than the Captain.

When he got to the cargo hold, crewmen were buzzing in all directions, some moving boxes onto lifts, others standing out of the way, waiting to board the elevator. He held his bearing straight and his chest high as he moved through the initial crowd, nodding his head to those who made eye contact. He slowed as he entered the main aisle, behind a crewman escorting a load off the ship. Crates were stacked to both sides in orderly fashion, and like the boxes floating ahead of him, were mounted on air propelled hover platforms that safely did the work of several men and lifting machines. The man moving the load simply walked behind with a remote to guide the gyroscopically balanced mechanism into its intended position.

The Captain spotted Gayle and Cooper standing near the entrance to the cargo hub, watching the others work in silence. Gayle's arms were crossed over her chest, and her face, which was normally tense with some sort of worry, appeared unusually calm. Her lips were devoid of a smile, but she exuded a carefree aura that Norman in no way felt at the moment. Within the hour they would find out if their future had been flushed down the toilet by their act of compassion.

Cooper stood beside the businesswoman looking equally unaffected, which was no surprise to Norman. The part-time criminal had nothing to lose, after all, and everything to gain. If they succeeded in the ruse, he probably collected the second half of his fee and he received payment for his actual cargo. If they were caught, jail would be a nice place to stay in lieu of being homeless and broke on Mars. Cooper had been thankful when they picked him up, Norman supposed, but he certainly hadn't been as overjoyed as he should have been given all that he was forcing them to risk.

That's the last time I tell Gayle that we need to go out of our way to help someone. Look at where it's gotten us, he thought.

He acknowledged his targets with a nod as he stopped beside Gayle and turned, mirroring her position, to watch the remainder of the cargo being unloaded. The entire bay would be empty in less than two hours, and no one had to do more than lift a finger.

"Are you ready for this?" Gayle asked softly, shifting closer to the Captain.

"I suppose. We don't really have a choice," he said, loud enough for Cooper to hear.

Gayle put her hands in the pockets of her tan slacks and rocked on her heels. "Nope, we're in it now. Might as well enjoy the ride."

He didn't like the implication that they were not in control of the situation, because he felt that at any minute, he could end the whole thing and get Cooper put in jail. Norman leaned forward to look at the man, wanting to convey that power, but Cooper's eyes remained on the working crewman and didn't give him the chance.

When the boxes were securely arranged and all the holding fields in place around them, the herd of people shuffled into the elevator. Norman glanced over the manifest before him, counting the actual number of supposed crewmen going to the surface. If anyone wanted to question, they easily could. They in no manner needed so many people to do the job. The list of crew had been adjusted to reflect the new crewmen, but it wouldn't take much investigation to figure out that something was wrong on the *Gossamer Wings*. Half—perhaps more than half—of him wanted Cooper's plan to be discovered. The rest of him wanted to keep his job and his relationship with Gayle.

The command group, including himself, Gayle, Cooper, and the surface foreman, settled in at the front of the vessel, each tightly gripping alloy handholds attached to the wall. After the craft began its decent, little movement was detectable for several moments. The video monitors in front of them showed their actual progress in lieu of a window, likely due to the extreme temperatures heating the outer layers of the elevator. Mars still appeared to be a red and white mass, but one growing much closer.

Hitting thicker portions of the atmosphere, the car swayed from side to side, evident only as a gentle motion, pushing to one end of the length of rope to the other like a swinging pendulum. The movement reminded him of time spent on the ocean as a boy, fishing with his father before the ban. Whatever the outcome, Norman doubted that he would have any fond memories of this particular trip.

Their bodies shifted as they neared the surface, a combination of the elevator slowing and Mars actual gravity enhancing the already present artificial field. The Captain put a hand on Gayle's back to steady her, and she thanked him with a smile. He often thought that Gayle had no idea how beautiful she was.

The elevator slid smoothly into place at the bottom of its cable, fitting into the power pad without as much jostling and cracking metal as its Earth

counterparts. As the hatches connected to the biosphere, howls of air being lost surrounded them. The double doors, big enough to fit two semi-trailers, eventually slid open to reveal a huge bay filled with cargo, vehicles to move it all, and people to control them. Norman had always entered Mars via the passenger portal, which was more like a market place, full of all the delicacies and souvenirs a tourist could ever desire. This entry into the man-made community felt much more businesslike and sterile, and he immediately knew that this was where the real economy of the planet turned.

A stout man of African descent met the command party, his clipboard ready in hand, the computer readout at the top ready to log in their merchandise. His bald head reflected the overhead lights, creating white oceans on the smooth ebony landscape. Clear spectacles sat on his nose, devoid of earpieces, giving him the look of a bookkeeper from an old-time western. All he needed was a visor and a white armband. His raspy voice had only the generalized American accent so prevalent among its citizens. "So we have the *Gossamer Wings* and all her cargo. Who has the certificate?"

Norman stepped forward and held up a quarter-sized data card. "I do, sir. You'll find everything in order," he said.

His boss shot the Captain a short, evil glare. "I don't think that we've had any losses, but we did have some additions," she said.

The bookkeeper's computer booted the card and he looked from his screen to the mountain of cargo behind him. "What do you mean?"

In the most uninteresting tone and words possible, Gayle began explaining their chance encounter with Cooper's disabled ship. The bookkeeper did not seem at all surprised to hear about a robbery in space, which made the Captain feel like an idiot. Apparently, he and Gayle were the only people who didn't know that such attacks were commonplace.

She was almost through when they heard the noise, and all eyes turned to the front row of boxes, which were only a few feet from where they stood. Even though Norman knew the source of the sound, the drumming click brought his hackles up. The bookkeeper walked toward the sound as the mechanism locked into place. He touched the small microphone on his collar and asked someone to bring the BSD out.

Though Norman had no great affinity for dogs, he had seen skilled ones at work enough to know that no matter how much technology evolved, there was still no replacement for the power of the canine nose, not to mention their intuition. The packs at work for the government still outnumbered other technical devices, and were preferred for their accuracy. Someday technology would come up with something better, but it hadn't yet.

A woman wearing a gray uniform with an embroidered star above her heart came from the door nearest the elevator shaft, her feet moving in a practiced, crisp march. At the end of a four foot leash, stretched to its maximum, was a stout thirteen inch Beagle. His symmetrical brown ears hung just below his chin, flopping up and down as he walked in the direction his handler commanded. Bright brown eyes shined from their sockets and his expression held pure enthusiasm. The woman looked to the bookkeeper, who pointed to the freight, which now emitted a low, humming noise, thrumming from somewhere inside the mass of cargo.

With a short, barking command that Norman understood to be "find" or "fin", the handler reached down lightning fast and removed the leash from the dog's harness. He sprinted the final ten feet to the boxes without apparent sniffing. The Captain suppressed his surprise when the animal honed in on the offending box immediately, sitting in front of it, and looking to his master for approval. As the handler walked over, the dog released an excited whimper and looked at her hand expectantly for a treat.

At the same moment of the successful dog's reward, the bookkeeper yelled for everyone to leave the elevator car. While touching the communication device at his throat, he said, "All tactical units, we have a situation nine-eleven at elevator two. We need assistance immediately."

Norman took action as the Captain he purported to be and began ordering his crew into the Mars habitat. The crew of the *Gossamer Wings* and their undocumented passengers spread out, mixing with Mars station staff as much as possible. For their plan to work, the number of people leaving the ship needed to go uncounted. The command structure all broke apart in a migratory pattern that would have made the most precise geese proud.

The inner compartments of the habitat became mass confusion as people shifted away from the threat. Rows and rows of energy field secured cargo provided convenient hiding places for the ship crew. Norman was beginning to think, though, that they might not be able to

get away cleanly without being noticed. He knew that the large double doors at the end of the series of holds would provide entrance into the general populace, but they had not yet opened. Unless a mass exodus led everyone out, Cooper's people might look suspicious trying to slip out that way.

The Captain caught up with a group of three of the potential escapees and perched with them behind a row of crates, staring at the only way to freedom. He waived his palms at the floor, his hands bouncing in the air, asking them to have patience. If he knew anything about panic in the human animal, he knew that it eventually needed release. The non-essential Mars crew should be pouring out of the cargo area before much longer, getting as many air locks from the eventual breach as possible. No one but the *Gossamer* crew knew that there would be no explosion, but they had programmed the fake device to pretend to be a bomb long enough to give everyone around enough fear to cause the confusion they needed.

After what seemed like ages, a group of four Mars' residents, wearing their red jumpsuits with official insignias on the left breast, sprinted up to the door and burst through. Norman stepped from behind his hiding place and followed, catching the rest of his party emerging as he passed through the open door. With them, more of the habitat employees advanced to the next section.

After the cargo bay was another cargo bay, stocked twice as full with colorful synthetic crates. This one, however, was minutely arranged, with labels on the floor marking which business at the station for who the products were destined. *Wild Bob's*, *Wal-Mart*, and *Office Station* flew by beneath Norman as he led his clan through the building. The pace could almost have been considered a sprint and Norman knew they were lucky they could rush without looking out of place.

The next distinguishable area appeared to be the population control center, where the refugees should have been stopped and prevented from entering Mars proper with their fake identification. Norman knew that wouldn't be happening today, though. As the door slammed back against its hinges, he could see that no one was at home.

Following an official Mars employee through the last door, Norman slowed on the other side, quickly evaluating the large crowd gathered in the marketplace. Talking, laughing, and staring, they didn't seem too concerned with the bomb threat. It definitely wasn't the first time such an event had happened, and wouldn't be the last. The past and current

government administrations had made too many mistakes to stamp out terrorism completely. San Francisco had taught them that hard lesson. The citizens also had the surety that the stabilization force fields could secure almost any amount of explosives. Or so they had been told.

On the far right side of the crowd in front of a restaurant with outside seating, the mass of people thinned considerably. Norman steered himself and his group in that direction, hoping to mingle and leave the larger group behind. Bringing his breathing under control with concentrated effort, the Captain kept his head down as he calmly walked to his destination. A quick look over his shoulder told him that everyone appeared to be with him, including Gayle and Cooper.

Against his better judgment, and the gnawing feeling deep in his gut, he could see that they were going to make it.



Mars had no native cuisine, since the planet held no apparent life before arrival of the humans. *Wild Bill's* restaurant didn't let that little fact stop them from serving a number of home grown delicacies, which purported to be hundreds of years in the making. In reality, the Plumberry Flambé Face and Great Crater Geef Tenderloin were strange hybrids that the government regulators turned a blind eye to on Mars. The strange dishes provided an interesting aura to the restaurant to go along with the vintage posters on the wall and space scene paintings. The dining room contained sleek black chairs and tables that reflected the slightly dim overhead solar lights. The architects had conveniently built the kitchen in the center of the room, with multiple doors providing access to the patrons surrounding it.

Gayle had eaten here on her last trip to Mars, sitting next to Norman as she was now. His mood seemed considerably lightened since Cooper and his crew had taken leave of them. Now they were waiting for the all clear to be sounded from the cargo bay. The Mars station bomb squad would soon be discovering, if they hadn't already, a cleverly programmed child's computer playing a game of perfectly timed *Terror Act*. If they had discovered it, they were probably all laughing and thinking of a way not to make themselves sound like over-reacting boobs. She wished them luck with that.

"Do you feel better now, or can I expect you to be wound up like a snake ready to strike for the remainder of this mission?" she asked Norman.

The handsome, blond man turned his thoughtful green eyes to her, his lips quirking into a small smile. "I will feel better in about a month after we've heard nothing of this. Right now, I feel okay."

Gayle shrugged. "I'll take that, I guess. You've got to admit, it's been a little fun," she said, holding up her hand, her thumb and forefinger a short distance apart in demonstration.

Norman's brows drew in, adding ten years to his face. "No, not really. It's been different, I'll give you, but I wasn't bored with the job so much that I really needed to be shaken up."

"I'm glad to hear it," she said.

The crowd milling around at this end of the habitat had dissipated for the most part, but what was left of it began parting in their direction. As the wave breakers approached, Gayle picked out the nervous looking man who had tried to check them in with their cargo before all hell broke loose. His black hair was slicked back with sweat, but otherwise, he appeared calm, almost jovial.

With two colleagues in tow, the man stopped in front of their table. "All is clear. If you'd return to the cargo area, we need to complete some paperwork and we'll release you into the habitat," he said.

"Great," Gayle said, smiling. "So what was the alert over?"

The little man's cheeks brightened and his dark eyes darted away. "Nothing. Some computer equipment in one of the government crates malfunctioned."

That explanation sounded as good as any, she supposed. They were apparently ignoring the positive detection by the spunky beagle. "Oh, well I'm sorry about all this." She stood from her chair. "I'm afraid my crew has already dispersed," she held up a hand toward the interior of the habitat.

"Understandable. You can just fill out the necessary forms for them and we'll get things out of the way," he said.

Gayle controlled her smile, barely.



Spending a week on Mars had been a wonderful idea, and Gayle was glad she came up with it. The crew had been able to interact with other people and resupply themselves with anything they needed for the return trip home, which would only be a few days shorter than the journey to the red planet. Hopefully with a little land under their legs for a while and a better understanding of what a few weeks in space can do, the second leg would flow a bit better.

Neghela LaDucci, the woman who wanted to launch herself out of an airlock, had decided that she would stay on Mars for a while longer and catch up with the crew on their next trip. She'd have a few months to recover and build her courage, and dignity, back up to acceptable levels. Gayle appreciated the woman's decision and encouraged her to take her time. No one blamed her for freaking out, least of all Gayle, and they would all be happy to have her back when she was ready. The businesswoman hated to think that anyone under her control might have long lasting effects from living on her ship, even if they were mental.

Gayle surveyed her small hotel room one last time, making sure everything she'd brought from the ship was packed in her bag, which sat stuffed on the crumpled bed cover. Though she could have easily slept in her quarters on the ship, which Captain Jones had done, she thought that actually getting off of the vessel for a while added to the purpose of their extended layover. In the end, Norman had only glared at her and left her to her ways. Most of the people on the ship had agreed, though, and taken the same approach.

The hotel accommodated everyone essentially the same, with a tiny room containing a bed, a chair and desk, and an entertainment station. Stylistic oil paintings of Earth scenes covered two opposing walls, representing the only real attempt at decoration. Overall, it had been a nice, stable, quiet place to sleep. Like the rest of the Mars habitat, and her ship, for that matter, the room maintained a bland, sterile atmosphere. With square footage at a premium, the little touches had to make the difference.

The businesswoman picked up her bag and turned to the door, stopping when the tones chimed from the panel next to it. She hadn't expected an escort, and certainly not one that knew when she was leaving. She hoped it was Alexa telling her that everyone was ready and waiting to go on the Gossamer Wings.

Gayle told the door to open, which it did by contracting into the wall, revealing her visitor, who she honestly thought she'd never see again. Cooper Gray stood on the other side, his hands on his hips, muscles bulging from his tense arms. The tight spandex shirt he wore clung to his body like wet silk, showing the curves of his stomach and the bulk of every other muscle. He had either been working out since she'd seen him last, or she'd never taken the time to notice how buff he was.

"Cooper," she said, a crack running through her voice.

The adventurer brandished a caddy smile, nodding his head to her. "Hi Gayle. See you're off to Earth," he said. The thick man shifted on his feet from one side to the other. Beside him sat a large black, canvas duffle bag.

"Yeah, today's the day," she said, wondering why he was here. Not that she didn't enjoy seeing him. Gayle just wasn't sure how she felt about it.

He nodded again. "Glad I caught you, then," he said.

"Did you report the attack on your ship?" she asked.

"Yes. Don't know if they really believed me, though. Government didn't seem all that interested, so don't worry about it. I hired a guy to go collect it for me." Cooper put his hands in his pockets and shifted again, the muscles across his shoulders rippling like waves on a choppy sea.

Gayle pulled the strap on her bag up over her shoulder and stepped through the door. Another step brought her in front of him, and he moved back a pace. "So what's on your mind?"

"I—uh—was hoping you'd give me a ride back to Earth."

His honey colored skin brightened, but she didn't know if it was from embarrassment or shame. He didn't have a reason to feel either. "It depends. Are you bringing any more uninvited guests?"

He shrugged his big shoulders and pointed down to his feet. "Nah. It's just me and all my worldly possessions," he said.

Gayle told herself that she should consider the proposition further. After all, he had nearly caused a disaster for her business. Cooper certainly

wasn't a saint. In the scheme of things, though, he had made the trip interesting and he wasn't that bad of a guy. "Sure, you can ride along. Don't be surprised if I put you to work at some point, though. I'm not going to forget that you owe me," she said.

His conciliatory nod told her that he didn't take her comment entirely as the joke she'd intended. "Haven't forgotten either. One of these days, I'll make it up to you."

"I look forward to it," she said, taking a step past him, motioning him to follow with a move of her head. "C'mon. Earth isn't getting any closer with us standing here."