

The Soft Underbelly

Alexa Petrov stepped through the opening to Gayle Darwin's quarters, the door swishing shut behind her. The office, which doubled as a bedroom, living room, and home for the ship's owner, was the biggest living area on the ship. Despite that, it didn't have much in the way of luxuries. In fact, the room had very little personal character at all. Gayle had still not taken the time to decorate it, so anyone in the ship, or no one at all, could believably be its permanent occupant. Alexa supposed fidianness could explain the lack of personality. In her heart, though, she knew that it was more likely a result of Gayle being so work-driven and out of touch with her inner-self.

As a slobbering bundle of fur bounded down the ramp from the bed toward her, Alexa remembered that the quarters did have some personality. Fifty, warm from a nap under the covers and moaning for her to pet him, stopped in front of her, bouncing on his front two paws, ready to jump if she didn't bend down to him. Treating him like the spoiled dog he was, though, Alexa gave in to him immediately and squatted to scratch his back and give him a hug. Trying to keep from baby talking the enthusiastic dog always seemed to be useless in the light of his sweet, droopy face, so she said her hellos without worrying about how she sounded.

Gayle watched them from the bed, where she too was snug under the covers. Her body was turned to the flat panel on the wall. Movie previews were still playing on the screen, an announcer hyping the next big drama from the Hollywood machine.

"Have I missed anything?" Alexa asked as she finished her greeting with Fifty and moved toward the bed. The dog ran up his ramp and trampled across the bed to reach Gayle, ramming his body against her legs and collapsing in a happy heap.

Shaking her head at the dog, Gayle moved an unthinking hand to stroke his head. "Not yet," she said. "This is supposed to be good. I wouldn't let you miss any of it."

Two pillows were fluffed for her and waiting at her designated movie watching spot. Alexa flipped off her light shoes and scooted across the bed, leaning her back into the pillows padding the wall. She was perpendicular to her friend, who had to curl her legs to allow room for Alexa's longer ones. "What's this called again?"

“Sky of Fire,” Gayle said. Fifty shifted his body and settled into position to begin his next nap, his eyes already too sleepy to reveal any trace of the excitement there a few moments before.

“Oh, great. That’s really a nice visual while we travel back to Earth strapped to a huge anti-matter reactor. You really know how to make a girl feel better,” Alexa said, mostly in jest. She wasn’t still completely comfortable with the thought that she was rushing through space at thousands of miles an hour, but she tried not to think about it much.

Smiling, Gayle took her eyes off the screen to scoff at her. “I don’t know how someone who has flown her whole life can be scared of space flight.”

Alexa shook her head, her dark ponytail shuffling across the back of her head. “It’s not the flying part that I’m scared of. It’s that dying thing—in a fiery ball of radioactive death, no doubt,” she said.

“If you don’t quit, I’ll tell Ricardo you said that,” Gayle threatened.

“No, no, no. Don’t do that. I have enough going on right now without an insane mechanic hounding me,” Alexa said, laughing.

Gayle reached to the nightstand and picked up her drink to take a sip. “So I guess you are finding a full compliment of passengers challenging?” she asked.

“I don’t know about challenging, exactly, but I’m certainly busy on this trip. That’s kind of a good thing,” she said, smiling. She had enjoyed spending time with Gayle and Zora on the way, but more stimulation seemed to make the trip go faster. “Some of the passengers are pains in the ass, though,” she added.

“Oh, yeah? Anything juicy that I need to know about?”

Alexa’s lips shifted as if suffering a soured shock and she shook her head. “No, not really. There is one guy I’m a bit worried about, but I suppose he will be okay.”

“What’s wrong with him?” the business woman asked.

“Nothing, or so he says. He mentioned that he had a stomach ache when I set him up in his room and gave him the beginning schpeel. Since

then I've seen him hunched over in pain and he looks like hell. I'd never seen anyone as white as a sheet until this guy," Alexa said. She shivered at the thought of the passenger's sunken, gray eyes and clammy skin.

Gayle perked up, leaning forward on the bed. "Did you send him to the doctor?"

Putting her hands up helplessly, Alexa again shook her head in the negative. "I tried, but he refused. I let him know that we had a doctor on board, but he assured me that he just had a nervous stomach. Don't ask me why, but I don't believe him, though."

"Hmmm," Gayle hummed, visions of lawsuits likely dancing around in her head. "Keep an eye on him. If he gets any worse and still refuses, you send Zora to him. The trick is to take action when there becomes a question as to his mental stability. Write it up in a detailed report and keep me updated."

"I will," Alexa said. Gayle had given them all a long primer about lawsuit prevention prior to the first trip. They had insurance, but it would only take one crazy Earth jury to put them all out of business. It was a sad fact of reality. Before the younger woman let that thought depress her, the movie started and the rest of the ship began to fade away.



Shopping for a more satisfying menu on Mars had not been as easy as Gayle had thought it would be. The cost of transporting real meat and fruits that could not be made on the red planet tripled the price of any item that would remind her of home. The businesswoman had refused, however, to leave without buying at least one decent meal for the crew. One night during the middle of the trip, they'd all be having juicy, tender chicken breasts, seasoned and prepared to taste, and all the real mashed potatoes they could eat.

At the moment, though she sat in the cafeteria with Alexa and Norman eating reprocessed and rehydrated beef parts and broccoli that could be used to plug a small hull breach. Gayle wasn't very good at trying not to be grump, so she shoveled the food without thinking about it and tried to concentrate on her companions.

"Have you had anything interesting happen with the passengers today?" she asked Alexa. The Passenger Relations Manager had been busy all

day. Gayle had seen her escorting passengers from one part of the trip to another, as well as retrieving additional supplies. Though she never appeared to be too stressed, she wasn't the same relaxed person she had been while watching the movie on the previous night.

Alexa nodded and swallowed a bite of food. "They've been running me ragged. I don't know about how interesting it is." She scooped up a fork full of shredded beef products and suspended it over her plate. "The number of towels used by a group of 40 passengers is astounding, though."

Gayle and Norman laughed. "I thought they looked like a dirty bunch," the Captain said.

"Have you had any more problems with the passenger we talked about earlier?" Gayle asked. The thought of having a guest getting critically ill during the transport from Mars made Gayle very nervous. She thought Zora would be able to handle most situations, but they didn't have the right medicines or machines for every possibility. First in her mind was the well-being of the man. A close second would be whether the release of liability all the passengers signed would hold up in court.

"He hasn't come out of his room today that I know of, I'm going to go check on him in a bit," Alexa said.

The businesswoman nodded. "Good idea. You know, he's not the only passenger this trip that seems a little off center," she said, surveying the room.

Norman followed her eyes, also taking in the groups of people enjoying the fine cuisine. "This ship is transitory. I think we can expect to always have a few people who are running from something, or to it, I guess."

Alexa leaned in closer and lowered her voice. "Yeah, those women strike me as running from something weird," she said. Her long, slender hand gestured toward a table where three women sat nearby. They were all dressed in long, white robes. Black masks covered their necks and faces up to their eyes. All three wore their hair in tight double buns on the very top of their heads. They easily could have been triplets given the limit visuals they provided.

Gayle studied them silently for a minute, imagining what their story might be, then continued to peruse the other guests. The man and woman at the table to their right looked like accountants, their prim business attire

out of place in the ship's casual atmosphere. Three tables away two men sat eating their food without much gusto, wearing shorts and sleeveless t-shirts that looked more like underwear than proper public attire. The unrelated gathering of people appeared generally to be just that. Though no one stood out as totally incongruous, they could also never be mistaken for any sort of team.

Gayle's calculating blue eyes landed on a man at the table on the farthest side of the room and she retracted the thought that no one looked too unusual. This man, who had sheered red or blonde hair only an eighth of an inch in length and pasty white skin, oozed his loner status from every pore. He wore a black, long sleeved coat that disappeared below the table and must have been like an oven underneath. He appeared to be done with his meal and simply leaned over the table, his mind lost in a thought Gayle didn't think she wanted to know.

She pointed to him inconspicuously with a thumb. "What's up with that guy?" she asked Alexa.

"He's kinda weird too, huh? I don't know much about him. He declined the tour of the ship and has kept mostly to his room," she said, also studying the loner suspiciously.

"He gives me the creeps," Gayle said.

Norman pointed with his fork while he chewed. "I've seen his kind. I'm sure he's just a prospector who didn't make it on Mars. Happens a lot. He looks down on his luck."

Gayle supposed that could be true. The limp set of the man's slim shoulders certainly signaled defeat of some sort. "He still seems out of place to me."

"I'm not sure, but I think he said he was a scientist or geologist or something. I can look in his file if you want," Alexa offered.

"No, there's no need for that. There's no crime in being different, I don't suppose," Gayle said. She might gossip about her guests, but she didn't intend to pry into their personal information unless she had good reason.

"It's a good thing that's not a crime, or Zora would be in prison," the Captain said.

Alexa laughed, almost choking on her processed meat. "You've got that right. Did I tell you what she did on Mars?" she asked, then began her tale.



Black space, and the reality that every person alive could not fill but a speck of it could be disconcerting to someone not accustomed to its beauty. Staring out of a ship portal for hours on end wishing that the ship would pass any object within a thousand miles so that the scenery would change might lead to insanity. Luckily for Norman, he'd logged in so many space hours that he almost liked the calm, unchanging emptiness. What he didn't like was observing it at two in the morning because he couldn't sleep again.

The young captain shifted his back against the wall upon which he and Ricardo were leaning. After cleaning various mechanisms in the engine room, they had settled into their favorite nook and taken to watching the stars, or the lack thereof, in peaceful silence. Their chosen spot was a closet-like space at the far end of the room, blocked from view at the entrance. The placement of the outer thrusters created the odd space, but the companions enjoyed it for its access to the only window in the room.

"We need to get a couple of chairs in here, don't you think?" Norman asked his friend.

The older man, sitting with his legs crossed Indian style and his arms folded across his chest, made a noise from deep in his chest that sounded affirmative.

Norman didn't consider himself a talker, but sometimes he could have a conversation for an hour with Ricardo, and the man wouldn't complete two words. Norman supposed that after this long trip to Mars and back, they were running out of new things to talk about. And beyond that, they both had issues that neither wanted to see the light of day. Safe talk and gazing was best.

Norman lost track of how long they sat there. The air rushing through the door hydraulics finally brought his mind back to reality, and though not expected, did not surprise him. Not many people had reason to come to the engine room in the middle of the night, but most people knew that he sometimes ventured here. Many possibilities existed as to why the

Captain might be needed at this hour, and few of them were something with which he wanted to deal.

Bending around the corner to see who had come to visit, Norman frowned at what he saw. The thin man with the military haircut, the one Gayle had said gave her the creeps, was walking around the room. His dark eyes seemed to be looking for something, or perhaps studying the layout of the chamber. His long, black coat swooshed against his legs as he slowly walked to the glass encased reactor.

"Looks like we have a curious passenger," he said softly to Ricardo, but in his gut he felt that it was more than that.

Norman slid his back up and the wall and stood, turning quickly into the sight of the creepy newcomer. Their eyes met, and the passenger's dark orbs showed a simultaneous flash of shock and anger. The Captain expected him to speak, to explain that he was lost, but no words formed on the man's pale lips. Before Norman could take another step forward, the passenger turned like lightening and sprinted toward the door.

"Hiya," Norman yelled, but the man was already gone.

Being in the engine room was not a punishable offense. Neither was refusing to speak to the Captain. Norman supposed he could let the man go and not complicate his sleepless night. He knew he couldn't do that, though, and then have any hope of sleep for this night or any other.

Norman shook off the shield of lethargy covering him and ran through the door in the direction his suspect had taken. The black coat whipped in self-created wind as the man ran out of sight at the end of the corridor to the left. The Captain knew that it would be only a matter of time before he caught up to the man, as there weren't many places on the ship to hide.

The suspect turned down the stairs on the right in the middle of the next hall, into the guest rooms. Norman couldn't imagine that the man would be stupid enough to return to his own room and act like nothing happened, but if he was a criminal, they were known for doing dumb things. After his years of dealing with all sorts in the military, nothing would surprise the Captain.

As Norman turned down the hallway, he stopped to find his bearings. The softly lit area was empty, save for the doors lining each side. The creepy man was gone and there was no indication of where he went. He could

have left the hall, or taken refuge in one of twenty rooms. After the corridor, the man could have continued on to several places, including the control deck and the cargo bays. Unless he made trouble, there would be no way other than a complete crate by crate search to find him.

Deciding that he was not ready to turn the ship upside down, Norman slowly descended through the hall, looking for signs of his prey. He looked at the code panel of the nearest entryway and noted that the entry field was red, which meant that the door was locked. Alexa kept all the unoccupied doors locked as well, so the suspect could only have entered a room with someone in it. Of course, all he had to do was lock the door behind himself and Norman would never be able to tell which room held him.

He came to the first and only unlocked door near the end of the hallway. The code field glowed green and Norman's hands began to sweat. Though he wasn't willing to tear the ship apart, barging into one room wasn't too much for his conscience. Without sending a message through the comm, Norman punched the open button and entered the small cube, ready for a confrontation. Since all fixtures were build for maximum space allocation, there would be nowhere for an intruder to hide.

A young woman's startled blue eyes shot up to his from the book she was reading while lying on her bed. She wore only a sleeveless, white cotton t-shirt and matching underwear, revealing miles and miles of pink flesh. Norman blanched at the shocked and frightened look on her face, but he tried to remember he was there to do a job.

"I'm looking for an intruder, miss. Has anyone been in here?" he asked.

The woman sat up, sucking her legs up to her body, and stripped as much of the cover from the bed as she could grip and pulled it to her chest. "Only you," she almost screamed.

The Captain nodded to her and apologized while backing out of the room. He doubted that she would have good things to say about him in the exit survey that Alexa insisted on giving all the passengers.

After wandering around the ship for another hour, Norman made his way back to his quarters. He finally felt as if sleep could take him. In the morning, he would write a report and find out the passenger's name. The man couldn't hide forever on a ship this small.



Gayle had always believed that the key to running a successful business was communication. Especially in one that ran heavy with safety and liability issues, nothing could replace knowing what was happening at every level of the operation, good or bad. She hadn't set a specified time and day for staff meetings, but she was beginning to think that doing so might be a good idea. If nothing else, the core team could get together for forced companionship and human contact.

So she'd called the meeting and drafted a short agenda. Her main point was to check on passenger status to make sure there weren't going to be any instances of space insanity like the last trip.

The conference room door opened automatically when she approached, recessing into the wall to reveal the brightly lit interior. When contributing to the design of the ship, she thought such a meeting place might be needed, so she had suggested some place big enough for a table to seat at least ten people. The large, oval table that sat in the middle sat that many, and hulked in the middle of the room like an elephant. It was made out of burnished steel and reminded her of a giant operating table. The appurtenance seemed to suck the temperature from the air to cool everything around it.

Around the table sat her staff, ready and waiting for her commands. Zora leaned over the table much like a hulk herself, her crossed arms holding her weight on the surface. She had her hair pulled back in a pony tail and wore her familiar teal smock. Alexa sat beside her, of course, her mahogany hair loose and flowing over the shoulders of her uniform. Norman sat on the opposite side of the table, closest to the head chair where Gayle would sit. He had his uniform on as well, the gray jacket apparently starched and ironed to within an inch of its life. Beside him, one chair away, Ricardo leaned back in his chair in a white jump suit looking ready for bed.

Gayle smiled and waved at her punctual crew. "Hello everyone. Thanks for coming," she said, as if they'd had a choice or anything better to do.

"Hi, ho, Chief Jefe. Are we in trouble?" Norman asked.

The business woman walked past him to her chair, casually lashing out her hand to threaten him with a pointing finger. "It's too early for you to start

with me, Captain," she said, but she smiled and everyone knew her mood was fair.

"Some of us don't have the luxury of sleeping until noon if we choose," the Captain said. He was apparently in a good humor as well, despite the lack of sleep that showed in his eyes.

"I pay you all to bear the burden of early morning and responsibility. It's a perk of power," she said. Alexa and Gayle chuckled, while the boys effected knowing smirks. "Speaking of responsibilities, I thought we needed to get together to discuss the trip so far and any difficulties that we might be able to solve. Since we have a full compliment of passengers this trip, I think the most increased pressure is on Alexa." She looked to her friend, who appeared refreshed despite whatever stress she might be under. "Any more problems?"

Alexa shook her head in the negative. "Not particularly. Everyone seems to be pleased and no one seems to be freaking out yet."

"Do you know if the sick gentleman has emerged from his room yet?"

"He hasn't, but I visited him last night and he seemed fine. Still pale, but he didn't have any increased complaints," Alexa said.

Norman reclined in his chair, pushing a short distance from the table, and crossed his arms over his chest. "He probably doesn't want to have to visit Zora the Great," she said.

The doctor glared over at him. "You'd better watch your words, Captain, or I could find a reason that you need a full, deep, probing exam."

Gayle laughed and Norman threw up his hands in surrender. "It's good to see that you all like each other so much," she said, then turned back to Alexa. "Do we have adequate supplies for our increased load?"

"I think so. Detergent might run a little low, but I told Lorensa to ration for a while to make sure it stretches. Other than that, I think we estimated well," she said.

"Good," Gayle said. It was nice to hear that the projections that they had made on Earth for the supplies needed for the trip were right. They had been within their budget also. She directed her attention to Ricardo. "How is the engine doing?"

The older man stirred, but only slightly. "The Captain and I cleaned her up last night. We've had no problems at all and the readings are optimal," he said.

"Excellent," Gayle said.

"We did have a problem in the engine room last night," the Captain added.

Gayle turned her dark eyes to him. "I don't like the sound of that."

Norman moved his chair back from the table and held up one hand. "It's nothing major, I think. That loner we were talking about at dinner yesterday made an appearance at about 3:00 a.m. He looked a bit lost."

Alexa put her weight on her elbows and leaned in closer. "Perhaps he couldn't sleep."

"Maybe. The only thing is that when I tried to approach him, he ran from me," Norman said.

Gayle frowned, deepening the creases in her forehead. "That doesn't sound like lost to me."

"No, I didn't think so either. He was looking into the antimatter chamber, but he really didn't have time to give too much away before he saw me," Norman confirmed.

"What is his name, Alexa?" Gayle asked.

The manager flipped through the papers she had brought to the meeting which likely included the passenger manifest. "Devorak Peterson," she said. "I don't really have much info on him at all."

"Not surprising," Gayle said, tapping her fingers on the hardened tabletop. "So where do you have him detained?"

Norman rolled his eyes. "I chased him, but I didn't catch him."

Gayle looked at him with a dumbfounded expression that she knew he could read clearly. "Norman, this is not that big of a ship. Tell me how he got away from you."

Norman returned her look with a confounded one of his own. "It's not a big ship, but there are plenty of hiding places. Since he really didn't do anything wrong, that I can prove, I didn't want to disrupt the passengers or crew."

"You've got a point there, I suppose. We have a while before we get to Earth, so he can't stay hidden that long," Gayle said. The fact that someone was acting strangely on her ship, especially involving the reactor, concerned her.

Alexa finished looking through her documents and shook her head. "Maybe he was just scared. You do come on strong at times, Norman," she said.

The Captain's cool blue eyes narrowed at her. "I'll take that as a compliment. He could have been scared, but I believe that people don't run unless they've done something wrong. I'd like to do a sweep of the ship to try and find him."

"I agree," Gayle said. "Let's do one non-invasive search for him to question him if we can. We probably won't find out anything, but at least he'll know we're on to him." All heads around the table nodded, and Gayle decided that being conservative, but proactive, was their best course of action. "We'll break off into small groups and search each room and cargo bay. Now, before we go, who else had any nocturnal interactions that they want to share?"

Everyone glanced around the tables and all eyes eventually landed on Zora, and after a moment of silence, they all laughed.



The group split up into the natural formation of Gayle and Norman, Zora and Alexa, and poor, lonely Ricardo. Since Gayle and Norman figured that their presence would give the passengers some reassurance when their room was examined, the ship's owner decided that they should be the ones to go through the passenger areas. Searching the rooms would take little more than stepping into the doorway and a quick look in the privy. Hopefully none of the guests would object too strenuously to the minor intrusion.

As they approached the first door, Norman turned to Gayle. "You should probably let me do most of the talking. People might get nervous hearing

about a security threat from a corporate type like you. From me, people should assume that I'm protecting their safety rather than the bottom line," he said.

Gayle withheld her laughter and nodded, conceding to his contrived purpose to take command. Since she'd hired him to do so, she didn't mind that much.

With the time almost noon, they would hopefully not wake anyone. Given the endless days and nights of space travel, though, the numbers on the clock didn't necessarily mean very much to people who had no reason to abide by normal time. The crew had shifts to work, but the passengers only had time to pass, which many did with frequent naps.

The first door opened to an older gentleman dressed in a blue jump suit with no shoes. It appeared to be an exercise ensemble of sorts, but he didn't look too worked up to Gayle. As a matter of fact, he looked sick.

"Hello, Sir," Norman began, a pasty grin on his face. "We're sorry to disturb you today, but we're doing an inspection of all the passenger compartments today. Do you mind if we take a quick look around your room?"

The man, who's graying brown hair, damp and mussed, sat on his head like a tired, sweaty lump, didn't look too happy at the intrusion. "What's wrong?" he asked in a raspy voice. He leaned on the right side of the door frame as if he might otherwise fall, with one hand grasping his shirt over his stomach.

"Nothing. We're just making sure no one is having trouble," Norman said, stepping into the room. The man reluctantly shifted out of the way, maintaining his hold on the wall. A quick glance around the room, which had no real hiding places, and a peek in the bathroom completed the inspection.

"Thank you for your cooperation," Gayle said as Norman emerged from the room. "We hope you enjoy the remainder of your flight." She thought about asking him if he was okay, but didn't want to intrude and she didn't know if she really wanted the answer. She wondered how Alexa had worked for so long as a flight attendant and been able to distinguish when it was appropriate to pry into people's lives.

They continued down the corridor, stopping at every door. Most everyone was in their rooms, and if not, they used the command code to

go in and look around anyway. Upon reaching the suspect's quarters, their search had been wholly unsuccessful.

Norman punched in the numbers and the door slid open. "We could have started here, I guess," he said.

No one was inside, though, and they had been relatively sure that the man would not be home. "If he's here, he's stupider than we thought."

Without a stated plan, they both began prowling the room to try to learn more about the man. Unfortunately, the only possessions in the room were a bag full of clothes and an extra pair of shoes. He hadn't likely been back to his room since his run in with the Captain, so it appeared the stranger traveled very light.

Finding nothing of interest left them both feeling deflated and without purpose. Clues about the suspect's vile nature or a big, flashing red piece of incriminating evidence would have given them motivation to continue to disturb the ship's residents and consume their own time. As it was, they both had the feeling that their search would end up a useless exercise.

When Cooper Gray rounded a corner and emerged into the hall in front of them, Gale felt as though he was a night in shining armor there to perk up her morning. His thick legs filled out the denim jeans he wore, which extended down to rugged black boots. Muscular arms protruded from a simple white t-shirt that left little to the imagination as to the landscape underneath. Gayle looked to Norman beside her, who was also sizing Cooper up, though his expression was likely less welcoming than hers. At some point she would need to get the two men together to make up and tolerate each other like good boys.

"Cooper! How did you know we needed to be rescued?" she asked, flipping her arms in the air to show her frustration.

Smiling at her, Cooper slid his hands into his pockets and stopped in front of them. "What I am saving you from?"

Gayle took a step toward him, so that she was equidistant between Norman and Cooper, and tapped the big man on the arm. "A number of things, I'm sure, but right now you are saving us from extreme boredom. Would you like to help us search for a bad man?"

Cooper watched Norman tense beside her. "The Captain doesn't look like he needs the help," Cooper said.

Shrugging, Gayle whispered conspiratorially. "The Captain doesn't know what he needs."

Norman stiffened to concrete, but didn't say anything. Cooper smiled and nodded. "Love to help, then. What am I doing?"

Gayle stepped forward and continued to the next set of quarters, linking her arm through Cooper's. As she explained what happened and who they were looking for, the Captain buzzed another door.



The soft hum of the engine surrounded Cooper, enveloping him in the familiar warmth he associated with his many treks across the solar system. The locomotion of the *Gossamer* was much quieter than his ship had been, but he could still feel the thrum of it in his veins. He never had to worry about being restless when he had that old friend to rely upon.

Unfortunately, he was afraid it might be bedtime before he was done searching the ship. He wanted to find Gayle's fugitive for her, but he wasn't having any luck. He'd volunteered to search the crew chambers and had not found anything suspicious, only slightly to highly annoyed workers. He supposed that the man would not be able to hide forever. At the moment, though, he had found some inconspicuous cranny to tuck into.

Cooper wondered if the man truly intended some sort of sabotage. There weren't many other reasons to examine the engine room as Norman had described. Given that the fugitive would have died also, there would not seem to be many logical explanations for such a terrorist act. Blowing up a private transport ship in the middle of space between Earth and Mars would not make enough of a statement to even bother, if that was the point. The only other option Cooper could think of was that the man was insane, which provided just as much motivation to track him down.

He'd been at his search for more than an hour, so he decided to find Gayle and Norman and see if they'd had any better success. The corridors of the *Gossamer* were largely empty. In the middle of the day, people usually kept to their rooms. He usually chose to read or exercise, and he knew many others meditated and slept. Whatever the cause, it made walking through the ship lonely.

Cooper passed sickbay, which had a white cross enclosed in a red circle painted on the door. He'd visited the doctor earlier and found nothing in her domain, except a fist full of attitude. The doctor had an independent, wild side about her that he liked, even when he was the point of her acerbic tongue.

As a thin man in a black jacket emerged from the next adjoining hall, Cooper perked to attention. His sheered hair and drawn features matched Gayle's description exactly, especially the creepy part. Cooper continued walking forward, as did the suspect, but the man kept his eyes to the floor and he practically squeezed against the far wall. Though he had no reason to know Cooper might be working with the Captain since he wasn't dressed in uniform, the suspect obviously did not want to interact with him.

When they were even, and Cooper was certain he had the right man, Cooper put a hand out in the man's path to catch his attention. "Excuse me, but I think the Captain is looking for you," he said.

Cold, colorless eyes pierced him as the man's gaze shot up from the floor. He stopped in mid-stride, his body teetering on his pencil thin legs, his coat billowing around him like a tent. Cooper seized forward when the suspect began to shift his weight away to start his running escape. His fist first gripped black polysynth fabric, but that was enough for his muscular pursuer to pull in his prey. Before the man could take a step, Cooper had his hands around two stick arms.

The cry that erupted from the man scared Cooper so much that he almost let go. It was a combination of angry infant and insane cat, and it was all horrific. The bigger man did lose his hold on one arm, to his surprise, when the suspect began thrashing against him. He had profound strength in the small amount of muscle detectable beneath his jacket. If he didn't feel it for himself, Cooper would never believe that the waif could be so strong.

Despite his unexpected power, Cooper maintained one hand tightly around the man's bicep. As he tried to pull him into a more secure grip, a right hook, followed by another unearthly scream, bounced off his jaw. His head rocked back only slightly and Cooper almost smiled inside. The blatant attack gave him justification to use as much force as necessary to subdue the man without having to feel guilty about it later. Using the compact muscle in his legs, Cooper surged toward the man, ramming his shoulder into a bony midsection. They crumbled into a heap on the floor.

Cooper tried to hide the surprise he felt when their position change ended and the suspect was on top of him, his skinny red face contorted in rage. The man tried to pull away, but Cooper regained his grip and refused to let loose his arms. Cooper wasn't sure what tact to take to try and get the man back into a position where he could restrain him. The raging suspect was stable on his knees astride Cooper, and Cooper's arms were occupied trying to hold the man still. The only good move he could think of was to let go with one hand and try to land an accurate, effective blow.

As his hand let go and began to form a fist, Cooper cocked his arm back as far as possible. In the split second it took to do so, he saw a flash of movement to his side that did not involve his current struggle. The suspect was falling off of him by the time he realized that Dr. Zora was standing over him and the thin man had a large hypospray sticking out of his neck. He hit the reinforced floor with a thump, completely unconscious.

Relaxing his muscles, Cooper looked into the doctor's eyes, which glinted as much as her mischievous grin. "Where the hell have you been?" he asked.

With a laugh, Zora extended a hand to help him up. "You're welcome," she said.

He smiled at her a moment more, then took her hand. Her strength did not surprise him a bit as she hauled him off the floor. He had never doubted that she was a tough, and smart, woman.

"I guess we should get him into sickbay and call Gayle. I don't know what to do after that," she said, looking at the prone man.

Cooper massaged his bruised jaw, opening and closing it to make sure no damage was done by the suspect's punch. With a heavy boot, he nudged the man's leg, which moved with a dead weight that confirmed that he was completely out. "Got a mind to make a few extra marks on him, but I guess I won't. Let's get him moved."

Gayle and Norman were only a few hallways away, so they were in the infirmary within seconds. Norman, as usual, looked as though he'd just been stung by a thousand bees, his face dour and red. On the other hand, Gayle looked as beautiful as ever, her dark hair loose around her shoulders and her blue eyes shining. Her jaw had a determined set as she inspected the captured suspect.

“Well, at least we can say he has done something now,” Norman said, referring to the fight. They were all four gathered around the man, who was lying prone on an elevated examination table. A gray heat sheet covered his still-clothed body.

Gayle nodded. She studied the man, her expression quizzical, her arms folded across her chest. “Yes, he certainly has. I’m not sure what to do with him.”

“He’s got to be locked down for the rest of the trip and then we turn him over to authorities,” Norman said, no doubt in his voice.

Gayle looked to Cooper, an obvious question in her eyes. The big man motioned his agreement with his head. “He needs to be restrained somehow. He’s definitely shown that he is willing to fight over something.”

She took a deep breath, continuing to examine their detainee. The weight of her position rested obviously on her shoulders as she debated the fate of her passenger. They all stood there wondering about the man for several minutes, waiting for further orders from their leader. None were issued before the suspect began to stir.

Zora approached the table, hypospray in hand, as the man’s eyes fluttered open and closed. His breathing became choppy as he awakened and his mouth formed words they could not decipher. Gayle looked to the rest of the team from time to time to make sure they showed no alarm. Cooper, though he tried to maintain a relaxed posture, remained ready to spring upon the man if he made any violent movement. Hopefully, the sedative that the doctor had filled him with would keep him subdued, if not unconscious, for a while longer.

Within ten minutes the man’s eyes focused enough to indicate some level of lucidity. Norman explained to him in no uncertain terms that he was being restrained, though he didn’t say arrested, for his strange behavior and that he should not attempt to get up from the table. When they were sure that the man knew how he was expected to act, Gayle began questioning him. For the first half hour, he only mumbled and Cooper began to question whether he was really awake, or even if he spoke English. He refused to give his name, though they had already looked up what was on the manifest.

Gayle tired of the game soon, and Norman had no luck at all, so Cooper gave the interrogation a try. Bigger than the suspect by three times, Cooper stared him down for several minutes, his intense caramel eyes

burning deep. His eyes had cleared considerable since he had awakened. The typical who, what, when, where, and why questions weren't getting anywhere. The man didn't give his rank or serial number, but he certainly seemed to have some military training of a sort. His dark eyes stayed focused on a distinct point on the far wall and never veered, even when blocked by a person or object. Despite the pressure situation, the suspect's breathing remained even and as calm as the surface of a peaceful lake.

"I hope you realize that we won't be on Earth for five more days. Anything you need to hide, or anything you think you need to do between now and then is not going to happen unless you cooperate with us." The man didn't say anything as Cooper made a half moon circuit around the table where he sat. "We're not accusing you of anything. In fact, we've already decided that we don't have any evidence of you doing anything wrong, besides attacking me. The police won't be holding you when we land if you cooperate. We just want to know why you were looking around the engine room and why you keep running away."

The man blinked for the first time since Cooper had begun talking, and a bead of sweat rolled out of his thinly populated hair line down the side of his face. Cooper didn't want to get his hopes up that the barrage of questions from them all was finally working, but he had some hope.

"I'm sure you know that no one on this ship has official police powers," Cooper said, stopping in front of the table with his meaty hands on his hips. "We do what we have to for security on a trip like this, but we don't prosecute criminals. To keep the ship safe, though, we really feel like we need to know what you've been doing. If you don't tell us, it could have bad consequences for you," he said. Cooper doubted Gayle would do anything worse than keeping the man locked up for the remainder of the trip. That kind of threat would do little to motivate a confession, though.

Licking his parched lips, the man said nothing. Cooper went to the sink and filled a plastic cup with cool water. He brought it back with him to stand beside the suspect, holding it in his hand nearest Peterson. "I don't want to make the remainder of this trip unpleasant for you, but you're not giving me much of a choice." Cooper waited for the man to say something, staring into his stubborn eyes. When he didn't, Cooper crashed the cup against the bedside table, causing everyone in the room to jump except him. "Ms. Darwin doesn't want to go to extremes to hear your story, but frankly, I don't work for her. Ya had the audacity to attack me and I want to know what the hell it was about. Let me assure you that

I won't stop asking you, kindly or not, until you tell me what I want to know." The bigger man leaned over the bed, his face only inches from the suspect's.

The man, fright showing in his wide eyes through his attempts to mask it, let out a short gasp. "It won't matter. You won't believe me," he said, his voice torn with anguish.

Cooper dismissed his urge to smile. "Let me decide that? Anything that has to do with this ship could impact our safety. Crew needs to know that." Cooper backed away to give the man room to breath.

"Fine. None of it matters," the suspect said, shrugging his shoulders and glancing away. "We're all going to die anyway." Everyone took a step closer to him. Zora settled in beside the bed, her trusty tranquilizer ready for quick application. The man didn't turn to see her. With a deep breath, he turned back, his eyes locked on Cooper. "I'm a member of the Gate Keepers."

Norman surged forward, his thighs impacting the examining table. "Who the hell are they and when are we going to die?"

"The Gate Keepers are a secret division of the Australian government, formed to stop a looming threat that the U.S. dictatorship refuses to acknowledge." He bit his lip and let his eyes roam to the other faces, apparently weighing what more to say. "I'm here in search of an object that holds great power, and danger."

"What is it?" Gayle asked.

The man looked at her wearily. "It is an ancient artifact from time gone by, when those gifted by the Creator ruled the earth."

Gayle looked from the thin man to Cooper, one perfectly sculpted eyebrow raised. Cooper understood her question perfectly. "What does this artifact do?" he asked, keeping his skepticism from his voice.

The man licked his lips and swallowed. "That, I cannot tell you. Only that it possess great magic that can lead to all of your deaths. I shouldn't be telling you at all, but it is imperative that I find the object. You must help me."

Gayle put one finger to her lips and peered at the man for a few moments longer. Everyone else glanced from her to the strange suspect

in their midst. The dark haired woman looked again to Cooper. "I have no response to that," she said.

Expecting something much more profound or authoritative, Cooper clinched his teeth and silently held back a laugh. "I think he said we have a magic museum piece on this ship that's trying to kill us." Cooper wanted to laugh at the man's story, discount it as the ravings of a mad, desperate criminal. He wanted to lock the suspect in a room and forget that he existed. Something, though, in the man's dark, unbalanced eyes told him that his claims were no joke, and that they should all be very worried.