

Only the Guilty Run

“Do you think he's crazy?” Cooper asked, staring at Devorak Peterson, their captive. Norman had caught the man sneaking around the ship suspiciously and he had initially refused to answer their questions. After he had given some explanation, they were unsure if he was sane. Now they had him confined to sickbay.

Zora shook her head, her long, honey colored braid swinging behind her. “I don't know.”

Peterson had told them that he had been searching the ship for an ancient magic artifact that could kill them all. Cooper didn't know what to think about the claim. The thin, haggard looking man had seemed sincere when he had told the story. Perhaps too sincere.

Cooper and Zora had set up chairs near the door, on the far side of the doctor's work space, away from Peterson. Zora had blended them both a glass of sweet herbal tea, complete with a pinch of caffeine powder to help keep them awake. They had volunteered to keep an eye on the man until they could decide if he was a danger to the other passengers on the ship.

Cooper sipped his tea as he contemplated the man. “I'm not opposed to the concept of magic,” he said. He glanced at his companion, and not seeing a rebuke, he went on. “Most of the time, what people perceive as magic is simply technology or natural functions that they haven't seen before and don't understand. Wasn't that long ago that human's thought fire was a gift of the gods.”

“That's true,” the doctor said, shifting in her seat and pulling one leg up to cross over the other. Her teal scrubs bunched behind her knee like crumpled paper. “I also think sometimes magic is just magic,” she said.

A little surprised the doctor would hold such beliefs with her scientific background, Cooper rubbed a hand across his stomach and stretched. “Have you ever witnessed magic?” he asked.

The doctor hummed a question low in her throat as she thought. “Yes and no. I've seen a lot of dying people live when they never should have recovered. That's a type of magic, but not the kind we're talking about, I don't think. I haven't ever seen anything that was caused by inhuman

power, but I do believe it could happen. The mind is more powerful than we can harness."

Nodding, Cooper thought about some of the unexplained instances he had experienced and wondered if any of them could have been magic. A man living for ten days outside of the dome on Mars. His ship's engines being fried from a thousand kilometers away by the marauders. He wasn't sure. He did believe in the possibility, though.

"Me, too," he said, standing from his chair. He was tired of sitting and Peterson was awake. He had been listening to their conversation, attempting to feign sleep in an extremely poor impression. Cooper walked slowly toward the bed, his boots squeaking against the metal surface of the floor.

Peterson, who apparently had a talent for being quiet, opened his dark eyes and watched him warily. If the man had straw sticking out of the sleeves and neck of his shirt, he'd easily pass for an old-time scarecrow. He seemed to look more drawn and pale every time Cooper looked at him.

"What kind of magic is this artifact? Is it man made magic, or the natural kind?" Cooper asked him. She stopped by the bed and loomed over the suspect, purposefully puffing his chest.

The man shrunk away without moving, inside himself. "Natural," he said.

When the bigger man opened his mouth to ask another question, the scarecrow man turned away, hunching his shoulders to close off his body. Cooper chuckled and shook his head. He guessed that meant that he was not into answering questions at the moment. Pressing the issue wouldn't be a problem if Cooper wanted to know the answer, but he just didn't feel like beating the man to a pulp. Instead, he turned back to the doctor and slowly rambled to his chair.

"The Captain will be mad you got so much information while he wasn't here," Zora said, crossing her arms over her ample chest.

Cutting his light eyes to her, Cooper smirked. "Ha, Ha. Captain don't care nothing about magic anyway. This guy could pull a rabbit out of that man's ass and the Captain would just wonder when he'd eaten wild."

Zora barked an explosive laugh and continued her cackle for several moments, doubling over her knees, her hands clasped at her shoes. When she calmed down, she leaned back and eyed her companion. "You might be right. He's not the most open minded sort I've ever met. And he certainly doesn't like you," she said, shaking her head in disapproval.

"Why is that, ya think?"

Intelligent brown eyes studied him, peering behind his skin. "He thinks you're sleeping with Gayle," she said.

Cooper's eyes widened and he couldn't seem to blink. He couldn't claim that the thought had not crossed his mind, but that was as far as the fantasy went. Why anyone on the ship would think otherwise was beyond him. "He can stop being mad at me right now, then, and save us both a lot of grief."

"So, you're saying that you're not having sex with her?" Zora asked.

"Not that it's any of your business, but no, I'm not. We're friends only," he said.

Zora studied him for several moments without speaking. "I was just curious."

"You and everyone else can find something else to be curious about," Cooper said.

Zora chuckled. "I hate to break it to you, but we're in the middle of empty space with nothing to do. Wondering who's sleeping with who is one of the best subjects to occupy a bored mind. And your potential lover is the most talked about person on this ship, so you'd better get used to it."

Cooper hated attention. He certainly would not stop associating with Gayle to avoid it, though. He grimaced as he looked at the doctor. "Great."



Gayle popped another Cheezy Poof into her mouth and began sucking it until the whipped corn particles collapsed and the cheese smothered her

tongue with flavor. She'd only been able to find two bags, at a large cost, on Mars, and this was the second. Norman was lucky that he was on her good side today and she had brought them out during their meeting. As it was, she gave him dirty looks if he took more than one at a time.

Prior to arriving back on Earth, they needed to sit down and decide how the crew had performed thus far and if any changes should be made before their next trip to Mars, which would be soon. She knew of a couple of issues, but Norman had the closest pulse on the crew and operations. After the first few hiccups Norman had contributed to, she was becoming more comfortable with him as the leader of her crew.

She shifted sideways on the couch to face the Captain. "What about Charles Martin? I heard that he had a drinking problem," Gayle asked. She'd seen the engine technician late one night possibly inebriated, stumbling into an elevator.

The Captain chewed his food and shook his head. "I don't know. Ricardo and I talked about him, but neither of us knows if he has an actual problem. He just may be passing the time, but isn't very discreet about it."

"Isn't that a problem in itself? Listen, if he's drinking to pass the time, I don't think that's acceptable. I don't want my crew spending the downtime drunk, because we could need all of them at any minute," she said.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Norman held up a hand. "You can't tell them that they can't drink alcohol," he said.

Gayle raised an eyebrow. "I could if I wanted, but that's not what I'm saying. Having drinks with friends is fine, but drinking excessively for fun is not. I'm not running a frat house."

Norman shrugged his shoulders. "It's a fine line, but I understand what you're saying. Why don't we put his name on the maybe list and I'll talk to him. Ricardo likes him."

"Okay, but he's definitely gone if I see him drunk in the halls again," she said. "Is there anything operational that we need to discuss?"

"Cooper Gray is being given too much access to ship facilities," he said, stone faced.

Gayle sighed, wondering why men had to be such immature idiots at times. "Cooper has been a lot of help, Norman, so just lay off him."

Norman's blue eyes, which were sometimes far from deep, trained on her face, studying her for several moments. "Are you sleeping with him?" he asked, no jocular in his voice.

"I'm going to forget that you said that unless you ask again, then I'm going to fire you," she said.

A hint of a smile touched his lips before the Captain lowered his head and scanned the notepad held before him. "I think we should consider keeping some of the more vital engine replacement parts on hand. Ricardo thinks some of the thermocouplings will need to be replaced by the time we get to Genesis Station."

"I don't know that we want to carry a lot of extra cargo, but I see your point. Have Ricardo prepare a proposed list," she said.

"Okay. I'm sure he'll be happy as the sun. That's the only issue that comes to mind at the moment. Our processes have been running smoothly." Norman dropped his notepad into his lap and laid his pen across it.

Knowing that Norman would probably blow his top, Gayle had saved one issue until the end. "Well, not everything has been smooth. I think we need to do something about our prisoner," she said.

Norman's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"We can't keep him locked in sickbay forever," she said.

Straightening and crossing his arms over his chest, Norman chuckled without amusement. "Why not? The man is obviously a menace."

"I disagree. I think he's more than likely out of his mind, but he has technically not done anything wrong. By keeping him confined, we are begging for a wrongful imprisonment lawsuit," she said. The insurance premiums to run the *Gossamer Wings* had been high enough that the government had intervened on her behalf to lower them. Still, she had to be extra conscious of liability risks and to avoid them. She couldn't afford a rate increase.

"The most important consideration on this ship is passenger safety, and you know that, Gayle. You tell me often enough. I think this guy is a threat to others," he said, his voice full of passion.

Gayle nodded and tried to keep her tone even. "I do know that, but I don't think you're being objected. The man hasn't harmed anyone. The only thing suspicious he's done has been to run from us. I agree that he's strange and probably up to no good ultimately, but I don't think that he's going to start murdering our other guests. And if he's not an imminent danger, we have no right to keep him locked up."

Norman let out another disgusted laugh. "So he has to actually harm someone before he's a threat. Then we get sued by the victim too, right?"

"Probably, yes. But, if he does nothing, then we're in the clear. Or he could continue to do suspicious things and he will be a threat. At this point, though, he's just a weirdo. The doctor agrees with me," Gayle said.

"Her official diagnosis is that he's a weirdo?"

Gayle leaned back into the sofa cushions, her face clearly expressing her current annoyance. "Don't be a smart ass, Norman. I think this is the right decision."

Not taking his eyes off of her, Norman stood, his posture rigid. "I guess we'll see, won't we. Are we done here?"

"Norman, please don't be that way. I've got to make decisions to protect this ship," she said.

Norman's grimace turned into an even more angry smile. "I thought that was my job," he said, then walked to the door.

Gayle wanted to stop him, to tell him that she was not stripping his powers as captain, but she supposed in a way she was. At least when it was the right thing to do.



A clash of metal on metal followed the air powered gust of the sickbay door. Gayle walked through slowly, ready for any unexpected circumstance that she might find. She began laughing as she stopped by

Cooper, who was lying across the floor, his chair tangled in his outstretched legs, his head crunched against the wall. Zora sat in a chair beside him, her face red from her effort of trying not to laugh.

“Are you okay?” Gayle asked.

Cooper slowly scooted up the wall into a sitting position, one hand rubbing the back of his head. “Physically, yes. My pride is only hanging on by a thread, though.”

“I didn’t mean to surprise you,” she said, putting out a hand to help him up. He grasped her hand without hesitation, and she tried not to notice the warmth of his skin and the strength of his grip. Cooper did most of the work, pressing himself up with his muscular legs, relying on her only for balance.

He released her grip when he was upright and straightened his black t-shirt. “There was a lull in the action and I think I might have fallen asleep a little,” he said.

Zora stood up as well and stepped to complete their little circle. “Do you always snore when you fall asleep a little?”

“Cut me a break, okay. It’s been a long day,” he said. Neither he nor the doctor were smiling, but it was apparent that they were developing a friendly rapport.

“I might be able to help you out with that.” She leaned forward and whispered. “I think our friend’s stay in sickbay is about over,” she said, pointing over her shoulder with a thumb.

Turning away from her group, Gayle proceeded to the bed. Peterson was laying there, his eyes closed, but he didn’t appear to be asleep. His hands were behind his head, his legs crossed, with the sheets bundled below his feet. His eyes moved toward her behind his eyelids as she stopped beside him. Gayle hoped that he cooperated with her and would not cause further trouble, because she didn’t want to have to deal with the consequences of having to keep him confined. She also didn’t want Norman to say that he told her so.

“Open your eyes,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “It’s time to talk.”

The man obeyed, his dark eyes falling open. The last time she'd spoken to him, Peterson had been full of anger and venom, almost dripping with it. Now, he looked like a sad, tired boy, who wanted nothing more than to go home to his mommy.

"Why were you in the engine room?" she asked, knowing she would not get the truth.

Peterson leaned up on his elbows, his body becoming a bony ramp. "I told you already. I was just looking around." His voice sounded vital and disdainful.

"Why did you run from the Captain and Cooper?"

He sighed as if bothered by her presence. "I was scared. I didn't know why they were chasing me. They're big guys," he said, flailing his hands in frustration.

Gayle sighed as well. She didn't believe what he was saying, but she had no way to prove him wrong. The business woman turned to look back at Cooper, who shrugged as if he knew what she was thinking. There was nothing else she could do short of torture, and she was quite sure that pulling out the guy's toenails would get her in trouble.

"Okay. Let me give you a tip. Unless you've done something wrong, there's no reason to—"

"I didn't do anything wrong," he said over her words, his voice elevated for the first time.

Cooper stepped up beside Gayle, his chest bowed out like a mountain gorilla. Gayle kept her eyes on Peterson. "As I was saying, if you haven't done anything wrong, don't run. It makes you look suspicious." She turned to Cooper and smiled. "And it might get you hurt."

Peterson flopped back on the mattress and turned his head away. "I'll keep that in mind."

Looking at the insolent punk, Gayle wanted to slap him. "I won't hold you here any longer," she said. The man's eyes seemed to brighten as his head snapped to her and he sat up. Her anger rose equally in comparison.

"Good," Peterson said, swinging his legs off the table.

Cooper stepped in front of him, blocking his way. "I'll be keeping an eye on you," he said, menace in his voice.

Peterson blanched whiter and his head nodded minutely. "Yes." He hopped to the floor and stepped around the bigger man.

Gayle, Zora, and Cooper all turned and watched him walk out of the infirmary. A heavy pallor of discontent washed over the room.

Sighing, Gayle looked to her companions. "I wonder what he's up to?"

Zora shook her head and Cooper took a deep, troubled breath. "I hope we never find out," he said.



This is not a date, she thought, picking up the remote control and walking back to the chairs she had set up at the foot of her bed. *We are just friends in the middle of a long, boring trip. There's nothing wrong with spending time together to break the monotony. That's all this is.* She flipped on the flat panel monitor and hit play.

Cooper scooted his chair a few inches toward hers and reached forward to grab another potato chip from the makeshift table Gayle had constructed on the foot of her bed. Fifty sat at their guest's feet, partly watching him for any irregular activity, and mostly begging for a bit of human food. Cooper had already slipped the dog two chips in the five minutes he'd been settled into the room. Gayle wasn't sure, but thought the guy had a soft spot for the dog. She'd caught them both making puppy eyes at each other.

"As you may notice, Fifty has not missed many meals, so don't let him make you feel guilty for not feeding him. I think he got two pathetic looking genes when they cloned him," she said, watching them out of the corner of her eye.

The big man pursed his lips, caught. "When you were at the sink he swore he hadn't eaten in three days," he said.

Gayle smiled. "I'm sure he did. Deceit is his only vice," she said. The black, tan and white Basset continued his innocent act, his dark eyes trained on Cooper. As the Digital Microchip Player began the opening

credits of the movie, she ignored the round chip Cooper “accidentally” dropped to the dog. “Out of all the movies ever made, it is amazing that our favorite one is the same.”

“It is. Guess you were meant to pick me up in the middle of spacewhere.”

“*The Earth, Wild* was the first show that I can remember that really made me dream. I wanted to know what living on a planet without structures over 85 percent of it would be like. To be able to see animals roaming over the plains acting like they were meant to by God. It really brought home to me that there were different realities than the one in which we lived,” she said. The ten year-old girl that she had been jolted through her with a long-forgotten burst of childhood energy.

The movie began with a deep voiced actor talking about what used to be while computer generated prairies filled the screen. Cooper watched the scenes with the same nostalgia that she felt. “Was about twelve when I saw it for the first time. Living in the city all my life, the Scroll, I’d barely seen a patch of grass ten feet wide, much less a field of wild wheat.”

Gayle had heard stories about the Scroll. Houston had once been an industrial epicenter, but after the need for petroleum ended, so did its prosperity. High rise offices eventually became tenements and the streets were ruled by gangs. The city government would never admit to it, but they had long ago surrendered the city to chaos. Few legitimate business ran within the city proper and Gayle couldn’t understand how any sort of economy, crime based or not, managed to survive there. Honestly, she tried not to think about it.

“It must have been hard growing up like that,” she said.

Chewing another chip, Cooper shrugged. “Guess so. Life there isn’t easy. My mom did what she could, though, and we eventually got out,” he said.

“What was your first job?” she asked.

“Runner in the Scroll. We moved to Dallas, then I joined the Air Force. Flew jets in the Scottish Uprising,” he said flatly.

Calling that incident an uprising was extremely generous to the U.S. government. It would have more aptly been called a slaughter. No

matter her feelings, she didn't want to talk about it tonight. "Then you opted out and bought your ship?"

"Something like that. It took a while to make connections, but I've owned the ship for about five years," he said, that sad look back in his eyes.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

Cooper leaned back in his chair and extended his legs in front of him. "I'm not sure. I've got some friends I could stay with and plenty of places where I can look. There's not many captain jobs out there, though."

"You wouldn't necessarily have to be a captain. You've been great on the *Gossamer*, I'm sure there are ships that need security personnel and managers of different sorts," Gayle said. She knew there was nothing like being your own boss, but Cooper didn't currently seem to have that option.

"I'd like to fly a ship, but I'll do what I have to." The big man looked back to the movie screen, his eyes focusing a million miles away.

Gayle watched him for a few moments, noticing the way his arms clinched over his torso and the how the well developed muscles in his face twitched. He wasn't classically handsome, with eyes that drooped a little and a slight crook to his nose, but he was pleasing to her nonetheless. She wished he didn't look so sad.

"Most likely, I'll get back into smuggling," he said, his voice bare and quiet.

That had been the answer she'd been hoping not to hear. She didn't want to pass judgment on him or point out that smuggling was against the law. Telling him that he didn't need to resort to crime would do no good. Instead, she kept watching the movie and began weighing her options.



Out of the three space outposts she had visited, Zora enjoyed *Genesis Station* the most. She supposed that the sentiment was relatively universal, as the station had been built with paradise in mind. The moon and Mars outposts were more practical given their business natures and lacked the frills built into the station meant for luxury living. She was only

sorry that Gayle had given them just one day to relax amongst its finer experiences.

The last week on the trip from Mars had been as boring as the first, despite the excitement in between. She and Cooper had kept tabs on Peterson, though he had resisted every moment of it. He'd seemed sane enough and did not cause any further trouble. One crew member ate some canned fruit she'd purchased on Mars and spent most of the night in the sickbay toilet, but otherwise, the final leg of the journey had been unremarkable.

Most of the confining trip seemed light-years away at the moment as she walked through a cluster of apple trees beneath a bright, yet surprisingly cool, simulated sun. Even more soothing was the presence of her companion.

"What are we going to do while we're on Earth?" Zora asked.

Perfectly trimmed tree limbs formed a canopy overhead, rays of light playing off the marbled green apples, the leaves perfectly calm in the controlled atmosphere. Alexa reached a long arm overhead and tapped one of the green orbs as she walked beneath. "I have no idea. I've been toying with the idea of taking a trip to *Lunar One*, but Gayle says we might be making a run there soon anyway."

Zora wondered what it must have been like to live on the moon. Even with the development for the mining colony, it seemed hopelessly desolate. "Why don't you come to my apartment with me? I've got to make sure all my stuff is still there," she said.

"I don't know why you don't just get rid of most of that so you don't have to worry about it," Alexa said.

Zora began thinking about the memories her items represented, and she could almost see beautiful light skin and flowing blonde locks. "I don't necessarily need the apartment I don't suppose, but I can't get rid of my belongings," she said.

Alexa seemed to sense a change in her friend, a sadness. "Okay. I'll go with you and we can look into a nice storage place."

As they emerged from the little forest into the last few feet of open park space, the sounds of wailing sirens hit their ears. On the far side of the road surrounding them, two security motorbikes and an ambulance

transport were parked erratically in front of Zora and Alexa's hotel. The siren stopped when two paramedics jumped from the emergency vehicle pulling bags of equipment with them, and ran into the main entrance.

Zora and Alexa looked at each other and sighed, disappointed that their quiet day had been so unceremoniously ruined. Picking up their pace, the pair walked to the growing group of people streaming out of the building. Zora directed them to the closest person who looked like they might work at the hotel.

The big woman touched his arm, and the tall Latino man looked down at her. "What's happening?" she asked him.

"A cleaning lady found a guest with his heart ripped out," the man said, throwing his arms together in front of his body in revulsion.

Zora gave Alexa a skeptical look, but she decided that she should check it out. She turned her hand over, motioning toward the door, and began walking with her friend behind her. People were now flowing out in droves, chattering as if they had seen the organ extraction first hand. She didn't blame them for being curious, though, as she often turned into a rubber-necker herself when she ran across something different. Human nature wasn't always noble, especially when it came to goggling at the misfortune of others. Anything could be interesting as long as it wasn't happening to you.

Inside the hotel, the lobby was filled with anxious employees and two stoic policemen. They were wearing navy shorts that went down to mid-thigh and matching button up, sleeveless shirts. If not for the silver badges latched to their chests and the shiny black weapons clipped to their hips, they could have been life guards. Neither one of them appeared to be having fun in their summer outfits.

Zora approached the officer standing nearest the elevators. When he conceived her intention, he put out a hand to stop her. "Hold up, Miss. We're not allowing anyone upstairs," he said, his deep voice quite official.

"I'm a doctor. I heard there was a medical emergency inside, so I thought I'd see if I could help," she said.

The other officer stopped beside her and exchanged a look with his partner. The elevator guard nodded and turned back to the doctor. "Do you have any identification?"

She pulled her debit chip from the back pocket of her blue jean shorts and handed it over. The officer pulled it up to his face to look at the tiny picture of her and the writing beneath it that said "Zora Lin Choi, M.D." He put his hand out to give it back to her and pressed the button for the elevator. "He's on the fourth floor to your right."

Zora gave him a half smile. "I take it he isn't missing his heart?" she asked.

The elevator guard did not return the smile. "See for yourself," he said, stepping out of the way when the double doors opened.

The doctor grasped Alexa's arm and dragged her into the car. When they reached the fourth floor, they had no trouble finding the room, as loud voices rang throughout the hall, the paramedics apparently working frantically. Zora got the feeling that Alexa was not too enthusiastic about seeing whatever was in the room. The dark haired woman followed, but dragged behind and appeared several shades paler than usual. Having Alexa there made the doctor feel better, though Zora didn't want to get her friend into an uncomfortable situation. With the prospect of someone in need of her help, Zora couldn't worry long about whether her friend would throw up.

The doctor stepped into the open door and surveyed the scene, vaguely aware of Alexa's presence behind her. The victim sprawled across the small bed with the two medics working on either side of him, their supplies spread around his body. In the tiny room, they barely had room to move. Given that the man on whom they worked appeared dead or next to it, though, their lack of space seemed irrelevant. Blood covered the victim's chest, torso, and much of the bed. As Zora walked closer, she could see that he did indeed have a gaping hole in his abdomen, though his heart was still obviously intact. His chest rose and fell with a hesitant breath. She recognized him as having been a passenger on the *Gossamer*.

"I'm a doctor. What is this man's condition?" she asked, stopping at the foot of the bed.

The paramedic to her right stopped sopping blood for a moment to look at her. "This guy's about to die," he said, his voice desperate. "We can't close this." He pointed to the four inch hole just above the man's belly button.

Zora leaned forward to examine the wound. It was clean and precise, like someone had taken a razor sharp scoop and removed a chunk of skin, fat, and muscle in one motion. A few outer layers of the stomach

appeared to have been affected, though it was difficult to tell how much in light of the rivers of blood welling at the site.

“Do you have any wound web?” she asked.

“Yeah, but the wound is too big. There’s no skin to close the hole,” the medic said. His partner injected the victim with what was likely a sedative to make sure he didn’t cause more bleeding by waking up and freaking out.

“Fill the whole with the web and get him to the hospital as fast as you can. The doctor there can do a laser graft,” she said.

The paramedic shook his head. “The web is not recommended for that use. It can cause systemic infection,” he said.

Zora pointed to the wound. “He’s not going to have to worry about an infection if you don’t stop that from bleeding.”

The medic exhaled a deep breath and pulled a three-inch can from his bag. He sprayed the gooey white substance into the victim’s gaping abdomen, the webbing automatically adhering to all of the open tissue, slowly stopping the gushing blood. Though it may have been too late to save him, and the web could enter the body cavity and cause infection, he had at least a small chance of recovery. If they weren’t too late already.

As the men gathered the victim and their supplies in a practiced rush, Zora stepped out of the room to give them space to maneuver. She found Alexa leaning against the wall beside the door, several shades lighter than the doctor had last seen her friend. The tall, dark haired woman’s head was tilted back against the surface and her eyes were closed. Zora walked to her and gently took her hand. “Are you okay?”

Without surprise, Alexa opened her beautiful brown eyes, squeezing Zora’s larger hand. “I’ll be fine. What about him?” she motioned through the wall with her other thumb.

The doctor shook her head. “He’s probably going to die, but he’s still alive at the moment.”

They both were silent as the paramedics brought the man out of the room and rushed toward the elevator. The victim did not move atop the

backboard, but his attendants ran with him nonetheless. Zora said a little prayer as they disappeared into the elevator well.

Zora returned her attention to her friend. "Did you—"

"Yes," Alexa interrupted her, the reflection of the knowledge in her eyes. She had seen the wound, and been overcome. "I came back out here and talked to the policeman," she said.

"Do they know what happened?"

Alexa shook her head. "A laundry worker bumped into a man running from the room. She said he was thin and pale. He had blood on his black trench coat, so she checked on the guest and found him like that."

The doctor's eyes widened at the assailant's description. "That's Peterson," she said, not believing it herself.

"Yeah, I think so too. I wonder if he was looking for this guy on *Gossamer*."

Zora shrugged, then put one arm around Alexa's shoulders, guiding her toward the elevator. "I don't know. He didn't need to look at the reactor for that, but maybe it's tied together somehow. All I know is that we have to tell Gayle and the Captain."



"God save us all," Zora said with conviction, looking at the shocked faces of Gayle and Norman. The three of them and Alexa were sitting at the conference room table, the black surface intensifying the pale complexions of Alexa and Norman, aided additionally by the gruesome description she'd just given of their former passenger's wound.

Norman's arms were tense against the table top, his weight bearing down upon them. "Why in the world would someone do that?" he asked, his voice that of a dumbfounded fifteen year-old.

Gayle leaned away from the cold metal of the table and hugged herself. "It must have been torture of some sort," she said.

Shaking her head, the doctor looked to Alexa, who still appeared to be on the edge of passing out. "I don't think so. I think that they wanted something out of him."

"But I thought you said all of his organs were intact," he asked.

"They were. I think there must have been something foreign inside him that needed to be collected," Zora said.

Gayle ran her hand across her face, unsuccessfully trying to stop the grotesque images infiltrating her mind. The last thing she wanted in her cargo bay was human storage containers. The regular cargo and the complications that came with it were more than enough.

"Whatever he was carrying must have been pretty important for him to go to that much trouble and risk," Alexa said. Her hands were flat on the table top, her fingertips pressed white. "He was the man that was sick on the ship, but he wouldn't let me help him."

Gayle stood up and began pacing at the head of the table. "Okay, this transportation business is not exactly what I bargained for. First we learn that there are marauders terrorizing the solar system looking for ancient artifacts and otherwise robbing passing ships. Now there's some weirdo searching the ship who later kills one of our passengers by ripping a foreign object from his stomach." She stopped, hands on hips, and locked eyes with Norman. "Something's not right here," she said.

He nodded. "Yeah, something out of the ordinary is going on. I've been between here and Mars a lot of times over the last few years, some of it while working secret government missions, and I've never seen anything like this. I'd guess there's a connection."

"What could be so special about an artifact that someone would kill for it?" Alexa asked.

No one had an answer. Gayle sat back down, crossing her arms over her chest, her lips pursed in thought. "I don't know what is going on, but I want to find out. I've decided to bring a new crew member to the ship. It's obvious that we need a security officer to keep the peace around here. Norman has too many other duties to worry about that too." She exchanged a glance with her Captain and he seemed to be in agreement. "With this strangeness, I would also like to have someone around who can keep an eye out and the ship safe. Maybe even try to find out what is going on."

Norman's agreement turned into a frown. "I thought we weren't the space police. Shouldn't we leave that sort of investigation to the government."

"Whatever is happening probably has some connection to the government. I'm not launching a full fledged investigation, but if we're going to be out here in the middle of it, I want to find out what we are dealing with. The next incident might leave us with holes in our bellies." Anger at her own naivety burned through her. She knew from working on the inside that the government shouldn't be trusted. Gayle looked at all the serious faces around her, and thought about all the other citizens who had no idea what they were up against. "And sometimes, you just have to do what's right."