

Chapter One

The false moon Aegis meandered across the sky. Though it was a space station, a warship, and it seemed strange to apply these terms to something so artificial, it was waxing, and the night side glimmered with colored lights. In a tight orbit, it circled Mars twenty-two times an hour, but that evening it lingered. Violet leaned back in the window seat of the engine room—that of her train, Hummingbird—and in leaning back, she meant to try to sleep, as she often did in that alcove, but the sluggishness of the space station vexed her. It slowed to a crawl, nearing a standstill, and brought a chill of anticipation to her nape. Violet had witnessed it twice before: mirrors snapped to alignment, power surging into the Godray, so-called because it cuts new valleys into the planet, purging the surface of would-be radicals and so-they-say insurgents. It was true that Earth believed itself to be the center of the universe, once again and as it did millennia ago, indifferent to the goings-on outside its gravity well.

Violet was an ice-hauler, in the taxonomical sense—a captain in that sense, too. But on a more personal level, that of her joys and her frustrations, she often found relief at the nib of a pen. She wrote memoirs, routine logs, political pamphlets, and even fiction if the urge became unbearable. When

she wrote about the indifference of Earthmen—personified so cleverly as it was through the ever-present specter of the Aegis and the astronomical indifference of celestial bodies—her words took hateful shapes, stabbing with polysyllabics like *subjugation* and *vassalage*. Her political literature didn't travel as far as it deserved (rarely did it venture beyond the steel walls of her locomotive) but where it was received, it provoked a tangle of respect and fear at its striking, venomous tone. If she could be accused of indulging in a flowery turn-of-phrase, it was only when describing the stench of a coalition admiral.

But that was her writing, which she produced hunched over a steel desk, scrawling her thoughts in black ink. When she rendered in color—with paints, chalks, or pastels—the Aegis, Mars's false moon, always shone among the Marsian nightscape's prominent features. A younger Violet tried, in denial of its aesthetic qualities, to express the warship's form gesturally, with one or two clean strokes and moving on as quickly as she could, but those fluid movements became as intimate and sentimental as the hundreds that endeavored to capture the gentle glow of the natural satellite Phobos. Setting it aside had emphasized it, mirroring how it stood out in her mind: artificial, interloping, ever-present. She resented the prominence. In defiance of this, Violet gave it the attention it needed to dissolve into the opus, to become an object in space and nothing more. Compared to her writing, she flattered the starship, recognizing that it did have a pleasing shape, but only in deference to reality and without sentiment.

The Aegis slowed even further, holding more fixed in the sky than Violet had ever seen, impossibly still for an inertial body. Violet's jars of paint rattled in their wooden crate, hollow and bone-dry. Her engine purred, gently coasting along the track.

"Barney!" Violet called up the stairs. Hummingbird's forecastle, her locomotive, split into

two floors: the engine room below and the upper deck above. In any well-lived-in vessel, as she was, which frequently delved into territories that fell off the edges of the map, that were beset with storms and violent weather, that demanded patience and grit to explore, to traverse, to endure—on a train like that, rooms settled into their purposes rather than be designated. Violet ate and slept in the engine room and had for many years. The engine's humming lulled her to sleep in whatever dark corner of its over-furnished labyrinth she dozed—her quarters were lined with shelves, stuffed full of curios and folios such that fishing mesh had to be employed here or there to keep it all from falling out. When Violet was thinking hard about whatever things she might have a hard time thinking about, she paced in circles, from the aftward narrow gangway between carriages to the engine at the bow and then back again. When she wasn't pacing, she was diligently working at her rolltop desk or laying in the window seat, as she was now, which was formed out of a wide, cushion-topped trunk and two identical armoires on either side.

Where the engine room ended suddenly in the bulk of machinery, the upper deck dropped through a doorless frame and down a step into the navigator's pit. A tall-backed chair was fixed at its center, which vibrated with the engine's clamor, and from its seat the navigator practiced his art. The levers, switches, dials, and gauges sprang up like weeds, and Violet knew them well enough, but Barney knew them best. He knew them in the way a dentist finds just the spot that hurts the most, prods it with his crude instrument, and asks loudly "does that hurt?" knowing full well that it does—which is to say: intimately, but not romantically. No, Barney did not love Hummingbird in the way that Violet did. He drove her slavishly. Violet could count on him to feel a belt fraying and let it snap rather than slow down. He worked magic at the helm.

"Barney!" she called again. Barney, her current navigator, numbered the only member of

Violet's skeleton crew. She might say, to a barkeep or a longshoreman, that she was between crews, in the market for hardy crewmen, even, and that if they knew anybody who was interested to pay her a call, but if she were speaking honestly she would confess that the pair of them were just fine on their own. Hauling ice was dangerous, brutal work—labor, in the way a calloused, sunken-eyed workman jealously guards the term. In the northern, glacial climes, well to the north of the Calms, beyond Mars's twisted jungles and storm-hewn peaks, Violet and Barney sawed blocks of ice from the flows. They'd spend a week or more in mountain shade, pulling frozen chunks out of a coulee and stacking them in the hold. And such was the depth of their reliance, their familiarity, with one another that they would not speak an unnecessary word between them for that time, only grunting instructions or curt reports (deckhand's poetry, in the colloquial way). An observer more used to a social setting would deduce, foolishly, a degree of contempt between them, but a proper laborer—again, in the jealous sense—knew that it was only respect, masculine endearment, that put them on such blunt terms.

“Barney!” Or maybe, quite simply, her navigator was hard of hearing. “Barney, look up!” She would have stomped up the stairs right then was she not transfixed by the warship's increasingly curious motions, unorthodox maneuvers, spinning now, its radiators dipping towards the surface. This was not the Godray—something else entirely. Hummingbird inched along through the wild stormlands where high winds dropped their pace to a crawl, heading south towards New Halifax. It was only the second day since they packed up the first of their autumn ice runs, and her hold was stacked to the ceiling with glacial cuttings. They were to offload about two tons at the icehouse in New Halifax. After paying their dues to the Marsian Ice Company—the audacious name under whose company flag Violet sailed, who dealt with matters of claiming stakes and setting prices, and who amounted to little more than three administrators packed into a squalid office down by the piers—after the company cut, all

profit from the first sale would be reinvested into perishables: fruit, medicine, meat, etc., anything that wouldn't make it across the plain to Central Prime without being chilled. Barney plotted them on a wider route, heading east towards Prime first and then tacking south through the salvage fields, avoiding the border toll that affixed like a blood-fattened leech to the fastest rail between the northern edge of the Calms and the city. Particularly ice traders, whose commodity degraded over time in a more tangible way than most, those loathsome tollkeepers would find some reason for holding them up, just to watch them sweat—and to suggest, without as much pretense as to make it palatable, that a certain kind of grease could be applied to the inspection was she, Violet, so inclined to provide it. And truth be told, even after the bribe and toll, it was cheaper to take the fast track, but the two of them agreed that they'd pay down the difference just to travel in quiet solitude.

And if Violet considered the geography of Mars, particularly that of its inhabited corners, sparse they may be, and if she lingered on her sense of the world as it was in the moment, her understanding of the way it fell into place, into comfortable units, into the status quo, and if she considered how she fit into that puzzle, if she fit at all, it was when it became clear that the Aegis was sinking. Still but a pale ghost of the night, it obscured more stars than she had ever seen, and tinged around its edges were orange and blue shades. This thought, this fact, crept up from the dark and grabbed hold of her.

“Violet!” It was Barney. She fell back into a well of memories, on the wharf of some wintertime past. The sun hung low to the east over New Halifax, but she faced westward where stars already blinked alive and the old mining towers dimmed until they seemed as flat as rivers. The phantom that rose into the sky then was a wisp of white smoke, curling into itself and then dispersing on the wind. Violet sank under the burden of her heavy particles, like chains they pulled her down towards the center

of mass, towards Mars, and kept her from being diffused into the crisp air. She sat with her feet dangling off the pier and let night wash over her.

“Violet.” Barney stood beside her and placed his hand on her shoulder. He hunched, broad and tall as he was, to look out the window. White streaks spilled out of the Aegis: lifeboats fleeing for the surface, abandoning ship. Its great radiators trailed behind it now, reduced to shattered debris. Somewhere far off, an engine roared to life, echoing off the bluffs and vaulting birds off their perches and into the night sky.

Chapter Two

Buy me a drink, won't you? A spell, woven a year ago to the day. Luther bid farewell to his corpsmen-in-arms with a peculiar hand flourish—more in the wrist than in the fingers—and took off down the hallway. There was no night or day there, in the sense of a massive body spinning on its heels, dancing for the sun, but the lighting routines of the Aegis did their best to invoke the sensation. The fixtures hid behind translucent panels or in recessed geometries, giving the impression of natural light, and, as Luther walked, they shifted from blueish-white to golden-orange. He wasn't late, but he sped up his pace anyway.

If you don't, you'll regret it tomorrow. He bought her the drink, of course. Amber, she said her name was; like the stone? No, she smiled coyly, and her eyes narrowed like a fox telling a riddle—Amber like whiskey, like golden hour. And so what if it was a practiced line? That's who she was, anyway: a tipsy. Or, at least, that's how Luther felt around her. Luther didn't journal, but in a particularly maudlin mood, he penned a new line in his pocket dictionary:

Am·ber (noun) — blazoned in red, a soldier's smile, a warm body in cold space.

He never showed it to her, and she'd never have cause to leaf through a printed book, but it always brought a knowing softness to his eyes when he pulled it from his bag at the end of the day—he kept it on hand for precisely those moments, and for the fact that his shelf already overflowed with a collection of biographies and historical accounts. Few modern books were bound those days, so his library consisted almost entirely of antiques, heavily-foxed tomes, old-fashioned literature of the kind that matched Luther's old-fashioned soul—with the exclusive exception of a memoir penned by a certain Captain Venerable Hudson, which Luther had printed and bound personally. If Luther's heart fluttered at the idea of Amber seeing his sentimental little addition to his pocket dictionary, it pounded when he imagined Captain Hudson of the Coalition Starship Aegis coming across a physical version of his autobiography. Not that it was appropriate to compare the two.

The broad glass windows that lined his walk between the medical bay and his quarters were heavily tinted, pretending, for the sake of playing night, that they did not have an unobstructed view of the sun. But up close, he could still see day's gleaming orb and the broad curve of Mars below them. The pretense of day and night didn't bother Luther; in fact, he found the 24-hour cycle natural. While others experimented with 32- or 60-hour cycles—the very same who petitioned to have the gravity in the athletics ring raised by 20% and whose experiments with human adaptation to alien conditions reflected poorly in his eyes, were indicative of some moral failing, some lack of respect for nature's given body in a sacrilegious way—while others blasphemed at the very altar of their anatomy, it was 24 hours, 21 percent oxygen, and 1g of gravity for him. “A true son of Earth,” so opined Chief Surgeon Perot on the occasion of Luther's recent elevation to Surgeon's third mate. And if he felt like the boy at the front of the class, with resentful eyes boring down at the back of his head, then he need only wait patiently for advancement into a peer group too occupied, too burdened by responsibility, to

harbor such schoolyard feelings.

Amber was looser with her schedule, but Luther didn't begrudge her that—it was her carefree attitude that he found most endearing, after all. She might stay out well into the morning on the civilian deck, in the quarter where the faux sun never sets and where a wayward daughter of the regiment might empty her purse in exchange for well-deserved leisure. But Luther didn't begrudge her that vice, just as Amber didn't begrudge him his devotion to work, his practice of medicine. She teased him often, declaring that no man ever fit so snugly into the hierarchy than Luther—that if duty to the Coalition had a shape, it was his profile, down to the millimeter. He didn't necessarily disagree; if he was well-fit for service, then he ought to serve. That isn't to say he was more cog than man, as his detractors might whisper from their corners—few days went by without Luther participating in some heated debate on the floor of their triage room about ethical practice or speculative medicine—sometimes even with his superiors. He grasped tightly to the universal truths: justice, autonomy, etc.

The deck now glowed with a sublime moonlight blue. Luther straightened his back and pulled his collar until its golden fastener was dead center, rank boldly displayed in embossment. He had asked Amber to wait in his private quarters—she herself still slept in a shared barrack down on a lower, more cramped military deck, as advancement through the ranks was not her primary concern. She had told him, in fact, that she preferred the lifestyle and intimacy of the barracks, that she had built an unbreakable bond of trust with her fellow corpsmen, and that it had saved her life more than a few times—so she said, anyway. And who was Luther to deny the inherent fraternity of military life? So quoth the Coalition charter: “thine sanctuary of brotherhood, raise thee to the stars.”

Though it seemed foolish to stand on neighborly ceremony at the threshold of one's own domicile, Luther announced himself.

“Aegis,” he addressed the ever-present ear of the starship, “may I come in?”

The machinery in the door whirred and then unlatched with a pleasing thunk. Luther’s heart rate, already elevated, jumped even more, and his wrist monitor signaled with a slightly nervous chirp that he might want to sit down. Amber lay swaddled in his blanket.

“You’re not”—he stepped in, letting the door close behind him—“you’re not”—he undid his collar and pulled it off, placing it embossment-down on the portal-side stand—“you’re not in uniform.”

“And shouldn’t you be so lucky,” she said, rolling, twisting, and stretching underneath the shimmering fabric, “you called on me, and I answered. Why don’t we meet here more often? It’s so—so quiet. So private.”

She purred over that last word, and Luther’s monitor chirped again. It wasn’t that he was unhealthy or prudish—his eyes lingered over the hollows of her clavicles, standing prominent over her chest and curving gently towards her sternum. The acrobatics with which the sheet at once fell to the side and yet maintained a degree of modesty impressed him—underneath his redder emotions rippled an appreciation for craft, for theater. It wasn’t that he rejected this pulse of blood or that he choked at the sight of a woman in the nude, the way a juvenile does—not at all, he appreciated the arts, and Amber’s form had a certain sculptural nature, a dramaturgy, that made it easy to elevate—neither form nor function repelled him, but his firm sense of the proper order of things that gave him pause, his keen awareness of the geometry of the clock, whose arms had barely settled into evening.

“I thought we might talk,” he suggested, carefully intoning to avoid an abrupt deflation of the moment.

Amber pulled the sheet up to her chin, intuiting some clash between her time and Luther’s,

that she occupied a darker hour of the night than the man who arrived at the door.

“Is something wrong? I must have misread your message,” her eyebrows arched inward out of worry, and she turned to look for the haphazard pile of her uniform.

Luther stepped into the room and sat on the bed beside her, slightly red-cheeked.

“Not at all,” he said, “just the opposite. It’s that it’s been a year—”

“A year? Luther, I haven’t even been on the Aegis for a year.”

“—An Earth year.”

“Oh. So it has. A year, really? Earth years are quite short, aren’t they?”

“Marsian years are long. But however one counts the days, however arbitrary it might be to number our time together in anything other than heartbeats,” Luther meant this in a medical sense and turned a proper shade of red when he recognized its sentimentality, “and anyway, it’s relative—time, that is, according to physics—and I don’t want to suppose that it’s meaningful in any natural, cosmic sense, but it has been a year. A year of us—an Earth year, as I said. And I think—I truly believe that it’s important——”

Then the drama of the sheets reached its climax, wherein a stage play the old king might die by the hand of his son, there on his bed the curtain raised over blossomed skin. What was important? Luther never quite arrived at expressing the sentiment.

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“MANDATORY EVACUATION: ALL PERSONNEL. THIS IS NOT A DRILL. PLEASE PROCEED TO ESCAPE PODS ON YOUR LEVEL. THIS IS NOT A DRILL. MANDATORY EVACUATION: ALL PERSONNEL.”

At the sound of klaxons, Amber and Luther disentwined, the room suddenly sterilized in

white light. Both were thrust back into the cold reality of space, back into their steel balloon with its stale atmosphere and millimeter-thin walls separating them from vacuum. Amber shot up, throwing the sheets off the bed, and yelled something unintelligible, drowned out by the sirens. She dropped down and rifled through her pile of clothes to start dressing. Luther, still in his pants and undershirt, vaulted to his feet and began pulling open the drawers that lined his walls. He pulled out a duffel and threw it on the bed.

“What are you doing?” Amber was almost fully clothed. “There’s no time to pack. We need to leave!”

“I’ve got some equipment here for when I’m on call—people will need me when we get down; if I don’t have my equipment I won’t be of any use at all. Just a few things. Hold the door open for me; I’ll only be a moment.”

Luther pulled entire drawers off their rollers and dumped their contents over the still-warm sheets. He rifled through the miscellany and pulled out various devices, vials, pouches, and what other medical items he thought might be needed—the tools demanded by his profession. Many were delicate and needed wrapping in cloth or had odd, oblong shapes that took two or three tries to find a proper place in the duffel.

“Luther, please!” Amber stood at the door's threshold, flitting nervously between Luther’s methodical packing and the crowd of soldiers huffing their way towards the lifeboats.

Luther tore open his closet and threw his wardrobe to the side, pulling a rigid box from the corner—the emergency kit that he lugged on housecall or when Aegis summoned him to duty, but it was an unwieldy bulk, mostly of form-fitted cushioning for its particular instruments, and it wouldn’t be possible to carry both the kit and his already-overflowing duffel. He flung open its latches and started

transferring contents, pulling out racks of syringes and spools of thread, shoving them into the bag as delicately as he could, or tying them to the outside while hurried by the droning message—by Amber’s impatient stare at his back. He ran out of cloth and now wrapped the glass items in his spare shirts, now filled his pockets with anything that could fit, now pulled the final mechanism out of the kit, tied it in tight, and slung the whole bag onto his shoulder.

“Amber——”

When Luther turned, the doorway was empty.

Chapter Three

Hummingbird parked in the crook of some unnamed mountain, in the saddle between peaks. The mountain tops were bald, and Violet and Barney sat just above the tree line, looking out over the conifers that carpeted the foothills, over those looming pines which grew to such heights as never could be seen on Earth on account of the lesser gravity. An autumn wind brought a damp chill to Violet, who was wrapped in a coarse fabric of hardy Marsian wool, but it was only a gentle breeze, very much a reprieve from the howling gales that so often beset the Giant's Workshop.

Hummingbird curved around their camp, and Barney set a small fire on the leeward side so that licks of firelight bounced off her walls. He sat across the pit on a wooden stool, craning his neck to watch the spectacle: the death of the third largest warship in the coalition armada. A subtle orange glow foretold dawn's arrival to the east, but the falling space station was still wreathed with stars.

Violet couldn't deny that it was something she had always wanted, so she babbled, quite uncharacteristically, to Barney over the crackling fire. But she supposed, deep down, that the Aegis had always seemed so fixed in the sky, so very like a third Marsian moon, that it was hard to picture how it

might happen, and now that it was happening, didn't it seem a might slow? Something—Violet tossed another branch on the fire—there was something unsettling about orbital mechanics, the principles, the simplicity, in the way that the Aegis was simply, quite simply, only moving much faster sideways than it was downwards. But then, by some mechanism, those qualities reversed as they would do given the natural order of things anyway, kept afloat previously only by its engines which resisted the pull of gravity, and yet somehow she, Violet, was shocked, bewildered, that its distance from Mars wasn't some static property, and that, in fact, the scale of being of astronomical things could be seen by the naked eye, could be measured in hours rather than eons. Yes, so it seemed, the Aegis was falling, and that was that. A new crater would be born of Marsian soil. If her reckoning of its trajectory was correct, that crater would form somewhere in the Calms. What did he think? Where did he reckon it was going to fall?

“Don't know.”

That was Barney, anyway. She couldn't help but launch from thought to thought, her mind racing, bubbling over into words, trying to catch up with the world as it changed before her eyes. She kept quiet as she tended to the fire. Changing for the better? Violet couldn't say—her feelings on the matter were stormy, or, rather, like a ship in a storm, in that they peaked and troughed in succession as each new thought brought some facet to light that complicated how things might play out, in whose favor the vacuum left by the Aegis might fall. It had been a long time since Violet believed some new form of Mars could emerge, that myth she had put to bed, scattered to the wind, dropped the curtain over, so to speak. What may come would only be born of Marsian qualities. By which she meant their stubbornness, their irreverence, their individualism, which pushed them apart rather than formed common ground. No, a united Mars could not exist. It wasn't in their blood. The Aegis was—and

would be for only a short time longer—the sole unifying quality among Marsians, that is, their distaste for its presence, for its notion of order and justice which it thrust upon them whether they wanted it or not. All Marsians felt that universal sense of oppression, the quite-accurate sense that things need not be as hard as they were, that their interests were not represented in any court that mattered, and that their cries for medicine, food, technology, and relief were disregarded by an Earth that had become indifferent to anything beyond its own petty politics. And what confederacy could arise out of a people whose only common element was hatred, which they only honestly shared in the past tense, hate they once held against something concrete but now was only more abstract? The upheaval to which Mars was then subject would not be a molting. It would not birth a new age. It would only bring about a changing of the guard, be it the tyranny of Barons or simply the Coalition once again. This was Violet's train of thought which came to her as she stared into the fire.

Barney shuffled, and Violet noticed he had turned towards her, away from the night's spectacle.

"I'd like to see it fall right on Ben Moody," he said as he pulled an insincere smile that didn't suit him at all.

Violet laughed, bent over laughing, more caught off guard by the jest than any animosity she still had towards Ben Moody—she hadn't thought about that man in years and wasn't quite sure what to make of Barney's grudge, but that only tickled her more. It is a strange mood indeed that finds Barney cracking wise, and like the smile, it didn't quite fit. Ben Moody, that roach, would no doubt survive it, so she told him between spasms of laughter. A short breath of affirmation left Barney's nose. The stool underneath him creaked when he leaned back—an admirable little piece of furniture to bear the weight of a man of his stature. His shoulders drooped slightly forward, and his back curved as

though he were looking down, ending in an unseemly lump of folds at his neck. Barney never cared about his posture, and why should he? He was twice the size of any ordinary man and still sat like a boulder, even with his spine curved and shoulders bent. And Violet quietly thought that though his posture was pitiful, it had a sort of religious pity about it, the sense of martyrdom Barney always carried with him.

Really, she said to him, are you really thinking about Ben Moody after all this time? How long has it been, eight years? Or nine years? After all this time! Violet doubled over again, thinking about the conman Ben Moody nearly a decade after he had swindled them into buying a fake treasure map, at the end of which lay only a long-expired cask of Jovian brandy. Ben Moody, she cried incredulously, and Barney shuffled again, sure that it couldn't have been his joke alone that sent Violet howling. And he was right. Something about the man who Barney had summoned out of long-forgotten history lodged itself in Violet's mind. Maybe it was the sense that the world in which Ben Moody had shuffled his feet, had made no small deal out of how precious the map was to him, told them that it was the only thing his father, may he rest in peace, had left him, and that he wouldn't part with it for any small sum, perhaps he might not part with it at all, sentimental as it was—that world was receding into the distance faster than Violet realized. Maybe the new era that dawned on Mars would bring with it an end to people like Ben Moody, whether literally, as Barney had suggested, or otherwise. And was that hope creeping in through the window, placing its hand on the shoulder of this daughter of Mars? Hope, what a funny word! How funny Violet found it!

“Violet,” Barney began, eyes shrouded by his broad cheekbones, angled up towards the sky, “we need to talk.”

“We're talking, aren't we?”

“Not about that.”

“Go on, then.”

Violet couldn't see his face.

“There's a small parish, it doesn't have a name. But it has clean water and is out of the way. And the old girl's falling apart, you know that. What do I reckon? I reckon they'll be back and when they come back it'll be no place for people like us. What we got back there, the ice, these people could use it—at the parish. What do you say?”

The wind-fed fire gasped. Violet hadn't thrown any wood on for a while.

“Run away to a parish? I never took you for a coward.”

Barney's hunched back stiffened and his head lowered.

“I'm not a coward—”

A bright light cut him off, suddenly bursting with the violent death throe of the space station, some core or generator finally breached. The Aegis shattered into pieces, great chunks thrown off towards disparate parts of the planet, each trailing a black shadow of smoke. In a moment the light settled, their small camp sunk into darkness, and before their eyes could adjust, a wave of pressure and sound cascaded over them, rustling through the trees.

The fire was extinguished. Violet and Barney sat in the pitch black.

“I'm not a coward,” Barney said.

Chapter Four

“He’s dead!”

Cold hands groped around Luther’s neck for a heartbeat, stabbing with sharp, ornamental nails, applying a medical technique that he did not know and suspected was no technique at all. His heart was beating—he felt it in the throbbing of his head.

“Check if he’s breathing.”

“He’s dead!”

“No—let me—I’ll—”

A pair of figures hovered over Luther as he stirred back to consciousness. The hands retreated from his throat and another sensation arose: cold wind and a misty dampness. Above, stars blinked through swaying branches. The broad trunks of evergreens loomed over him—pines of a height that made him dizzy, or perhaps they towered out of his dizziness. Luther staggered to his feet.

“Mars,” the man said, “yes, Mars—though where in particular, I’m not sure. I’m not sure. Somewhere to the North. We found you unconscious. Flame of Mawi, that’s her name, she carried

you all the way to the lifeboat. You should thank her.”

“If it wasn’t for Sam, I wouldn’t have found you at all. And, of course, we simply could not leave you. I carried you, yes, but only a short way. You nearly made it. What happened?”

“I was”—Luther blinked—“I was, yes, I was packing. And then——”

“My dear,” Flame said, “nothing in those bags measures in importance to your life. Do not dwell on your lost possessions. Be happy that you are alive and, it seems, unhurt.”

Luther looked to the sky again where dusty, gray clouds began to blot out the stars. The Aegis had painted a brilliant streak across the night—the Aegis, where still laid the tools that were no less than parts of his body, no less than his hands and feet, tossed away like dead weight. Without them, Luther could only sit by and comfort the injured and the dying. He could only run through procedures in his mind, manipulate his phantom instruments on the air, and repeat that awful lie that men of medicine have said for all of human history: there’s nothing to be done. It wasn’t her fault. She couldn’t have known.

Branches picked up in the wind and rattled their needles loose. Somewhere far off, a Marsian wolf howled at the interloper moon which glowed brighter in the sky than ever before. Luther’s eyes adjusted, and Flame of Mawi’s features became defined under the dull light that limped from the lifeboat. Her cheeks creased with a plunging frown and she had a squarish face that was dignified and finely aged. Cables of her black hair swung in the wind like chimes. Though her eyes held a soft matron kindness, her nose stood above her lips with fatherly disappointment. A particular garment hung off her arms: flowing, airy fabric of a brownish-reddish hue, connecting two sleeves over her shoulders and around her neck with a buttoned collar, revealing a sliver of clavicle between it and her more contemporary dress. Luther recognized it as a dignitary’s mantle, though in the dark he

couldn't make out the sigil on the buttons. He straightened his posture.

"Well, no matter." She softened, swallowing the judgment Luther saw in her nostrils. "No matter at all. We're safe now. Isn't that right, Sam? We'll be just fine."

"Safe? No," Sam said, "no, safe isn't the word that I would use. You see, we're nowhere near the Calms. There's nothing around here for days but woodland. Mountains. A week, at least, from Prime, and that's by rail. I don't see any signs of another lifeboat nearby. And I say, at the risk of tempting fate, those gathering clouds signal a storm. What's your name, son?"

"Luther. Luther Hudson. Surgeon's third mate."

Sam squinted through his wire-rimmed spectacles and scratched his gray-speckled beard. Although he stood shorter than Flame of Mawi—indeed, shorter by two heads, but she too was unusually tall—and although his face was round and slightly plump, he had a melancholy and intellectual coldness about him.

"Nira Samsara, professor of Marsian archaeology, New Aster University, New Aster. At your service. Yes, we are lost, but if you put your trust in me, I shall guide all of us back to civilization."

"We don't need a guide," Luther said, "we need to be rescued."

"I agree," Flame said, "I agree with the doctor. Perhaps the young man has a way to contact his legion? Go along, now."

"Yes, I"—Luther pulled up his wrist—"What happened to my wrist monitor?"

"It was broken," Sam said, "and it wouldn't work without the Aegis in orbit, either way. Listen to me, nobody is coming for us. The nearest Coalition warship is currently en route to Jupiter. Waiting will just get us killed—or worse. This plume of smoke is a signal to every pirate and bandit in these woods that a handful of helpless Earthmen are ripe to be plucked off the vine."

“Pirates?” Flame warbled, “surely not.”

“Coalition protocol is particular in this matter. Stay with the lifeboat. Stay put. Do not wander otherwise you will be presumed dead and missing. This plume of smoke is our best chance of being found at all, most likely by the search and rescue division, who no doubt are scouring the surface at the very moment—the captain leading the way—and will find us soon enough, as long as we——“

A bright light bathed the woods in sharp, white relief. The antimatter reactor—or some such system of reaction and energy—had burst and, with it, the entire spaceship tore at the seams. Flame of Mawi gasped. The Aegis was gone. They were lost and alone in the far reaches of Mars.

Sam slung his pack on and started off into the dark.

“Follow me! I’ve already packed up everything worthwhile from the lifeboat. Let’s leave it behind before it gets us killed.”

Flame of Mawi shivered and cast nervous glances back at the lifeboat, but followed behind Sam. The wind picked up. Soon it became a howl and the lifeboat hatch creaked. The inside slowly filled with orange pine needles, piling up on the hard-plastic seats. Luther followed after them.

As they walked, Luther rifled through his pockets. He pulled out the miscellany he had shoved in his pants out of urgency: bandages, a spool of thread, needles, scalpels, and a book, his pocket dictionary. Out of the dictionary slid a folded piece of paper. He rubbed its corners, but did not unfold it, and slid it back in to the book, then slipped the book back into his pocket. It wasn’t enough to assemble into a proper medkit, let alone properly treat injuries, but it would have to do.

“I should have asked, is anybody injured? I don’t have much, but I will do my best.”

“Quite alright, doctor,” Sam said.

The Marsian sky was dark on clear nights, and even blacker with the clouds mustering into

formation above them. If it weren't for the small light sticks that they found in the lifeboat, it would have been too dark to travel at all. All three kept careful watch of their feet as they traveled over the rocky, rooted slopes. From orbit, Mars looked so perfectly flat that it offended Luther that such a grade could exist on a perfectly round marble, and that it could take such an effort to traverse what his eye could traverse in less than a blink. Even the lesser gravity, only about a third of what he was used to, did little to ease the exertion. And each time Luther took a step, he placed his foot on ancient ground which no doubt had never felt human steps before, so unlike well-trodden Earth that he half expected the ground to recoil from the alien sensation. He began to retrace exactly the path that Sam took.

“Please,” Luther said, “tell me what we’re looking for. I can help—I had survival training at the academy.”

“Worry not, doctor, we will know it when we see it!”

Luther couldn't see his face, but was sure that Sam was smiling.

“Do you think the pirates,” Flame began tentatively, “would recognize diplomatic immunity? Doctor, you see, I am a liaison on behalf of the Inare Consensus, and am duly awaited at the embassy in Central Prime.”

“I think it unlikely,” Sam said.

“No, I suppose not. I suppose they'd want a ransom which of course could be arranged. I simply hate being tardy. My people are in ever so serious need of me—the previous liaison left in quite the hurry! I simply cannot stand being late.”

“With any luck, we'll have you in Prime in a week.”

Luther occupied his mind by trying to summon up the wisdom of the Coalition survivor's manual which he had studied closely. He could vividly picture the pages as they flickered on the

monitor, recall even their numbers and subsections and the titles they'd been given, but couldn't remember a single word that was written on them.

Lightning cracked and rain began to pour. There were no stars left above them. The treetops swayed madly and tossed branches at the travelers who jumped each time a limb clattered nearby. Sam opened his bag and tossed each of them a thin, plastic rain coat, but it did little to keep them from soaking through. Quickly Luther began shivering uncontrollably. It wouldn't be long until hypothermia set in—and then confusion, panic, and finally death.

"I say we turn back," Luther said, "it's a risk, but if trace our steps back to the lifeboat, we can wait out the storm there. It's no good hiking in this kind of weather."

"Quiet! This is it!"

Sam dropped down to his knees and laid his ear against something on the ground. Luther raced over to his side. On the ground was a metal bar about the width of a palm. Luther brushed off more pine needles and followed the bar down the grade of the slope until it became clear that it was track.

"The Lacework?"

"That's right, son. These rails are never more than a few miles from anywhere on the surface—I knew we'd come across it quick enough. The Terraformers used them to get their machinery around. These days it's how any good Marsian gets from place to place. And if we're lucky," Sam trailed off into thought.

"T"—Flame sneezed—"I fail to see how this is supposed to save us. We should have stayed at the lifeboat like the doctor said. At least then we'd be out of the rain."

"It's an old trick that I learned, oh, fifteen years ago now. These rails, you must

understand, have existed for millennia. They're made of hardier stuff than anything you'd find on Earth. Let's see. You just need to find the right spot."

Sam pulled out a crooked metal tool and, while holding his ear to the rail, began to tap around the slick metal surface.

"You see," he continued, "this is how Martian trains communicate. Or, rather, how their navigators communicate. Since there isn't much in the way of signals or traffic controllers, they need to keep track of one another to make sure they aren't on a collision course. Ah! There it is. Yes, they send and receive signals within the rail itself—exceedingly clever."

"I see!" Flame said. "And how far do these signals travel?"

"Give or take, twenty miles or so."

"Oh. Oh dear. Sam you——"

"Twenty miles?" Luther said. "We're a hundred miles at least from the nearest settlement, let alone a city. This was not a plan at all! We'll send out a distress signal and the pirates will pounce all the same. The only difference is that we'll be dead to exposure by the time they arrive."

"The difference," Sam said, "is that I'm not sending a distress signal."

"But, professor"—Flame looked to Luther for affirmation—"professor, we are in distress."

"And I'm going to get help. Trust me."

Luther collapsed to the ground, put his head in his hands, and began to cry. It was just his luck. Everything was going well—life aboard the Aegis had settled into the perfect routine. Amber—oh, Amber—Amber brought just the right amount of variety and spontaneity to his regimented schedule. He wouldn't have been surgeon's third mate for more than a few more months, and then it was on to second mate. Then, no doubt, first mate quickly after. Captain Hudson himself performed the frocking

ceremony for the surgeon's first mate. Maybe he'd have asked Amber to marry him, or maybe they'd have split ways by then, naturally growing apart as people do—he wasn't so fixed on the present that he couldn't see that things change as time wound forward. But that was the expectation: for time to wind. On that day, time broke. It split, and the gap was dark and difficult to recall—time began again with a brutal headache and strange people and strange places. His only comfort was that it would be over soon and that death to exposure wasn't the worst of all deaths. It wasn't entirely pleasant either.

Luther held his hand in front of him—his normally steady surgeon's hand—and it shook as though it were trying to come loose. It'd be hypothermia soon, if not already. His whole body, in fact, was shaking. Rapidly, violently, it was bouncing up and down and his teeth were chattering. Sam grabbed him by the collar and pulled him off the rail.

“Out of the way!” Sam shouted.

A black-bodied train cut through the rain and slowed to a stop, the brakes screaming and the engine churning and its intakes gasping for air. The front-mounted light bathed the forest and blinded Luther, then dimmed and then extinguished. Shadows flashed through the opaque windows which ran thick with rain and glowed a flickering, orange light from inside. A door in the locomotive swung open. A ladder slid out and then dropped to the ground, clattering against the side of the train. Sam scrambled in first and then helped Flame of Mawi up the ladder, grasping her hand tightly and flashing the white of his teeth. Luther climbed in last.

Chapter Five

The crew of Hummingbird then counted five.

A fierce, howling wind beat against the steel walls of the locomotive. The wreck of the Aegis had fallen and carved its own grave into Marsian soil, so deep that even far to the north, in the Giant's Workshop, the anguished, pitiful cry of its impact shook the walls of Violet's train. The storm that followed was unlike anything she ever knew, carrying with it a moon's worth of dust that blocked out the sun, sooty smoke whipping through the stratosphere, leaving only an eerie smudge of red light to give form to the landscape. On the wind rode lightning and thunder, hail the size of fists, freezing sickles of rain that wailed on Hummingbird until she moaned, whining under the pressure of calamity. Violet's heart ached for her besieged vessel.

After an hour of desperate shoring, plugging holes with sealant until they were nauseous from the stench of rubber, they finally sealed the carriage. The five of them sat around the upper deck's table in the dusky dim light of a hurricane lamp.

Violet began, "now——"

“Now!” Flame of Mawi shot up, her chair clattering behind her. “Now let me put it plainly so everyone can understand. In plain, simple language. I will explain it all.

“My name is Flame of Mawi, child of the Inars, a long way from home. I have been sent here to ply my trade, that of negotiation, diplomacy, speechcraft—I am an ambassador on behalf of my people to Mars, awaited at the embassy in Central Prime. I left my people what feels like a lifetime ago and truthfully I wouldn’t know how to label the passage of time of such a journey. Among the stars, time becomes such a slippery thing. No less than three months ago, I can say for sure, I lived in the Blue Citadel. Crystal fountains, onion-peaked domes, turquoise surf breaking onto golden shores. Above me, the visages of martyrs whose mournful gazes I have only recently come to understand. The first Septemvir came to me in his hour of need. Said he: ‘Sweet Flame, our people are hurting.’ How, I ask, how are they hurting? What can I do to heal them? Mars, so he told me, is the seat of injustice. The Abbas have been stripped of their vestments, their idols stolen, their temples toppled. Our craftsmen and tradesmen who seek only to live quiet lives have been extorted, press-ganged, persecuted. These fine Inare have a right to dignity no matter where in the wide universe they are—this tenet is central to our credo. They must be helped. Said I: my lord, I am at your service. Whatever it is you desire.

“So it was: I became a liaison-to-be, destined for Mars. Was I afraid? Not at all. Once it had settled in my mind, I can say that I became giddy at the thought of far-flung lands, new cultures, new worlds—I must have read through every book on Marsian history in the grand archive. Old, dusty tomes, the wisdom of ancient scholars. And this gray in my hair is indeed a token of age rather than frightfulness or timidity. Mars isn’t so wild in the broad universe—so I thought. The sun still shone in the sky there. The days were counted in hours much like Earth. And there I could do good. I could

give back to my people who are a strong, robust folk, but too trusting and prone to be taken advantage of. They needed me. They still need me. With these thoughts in mind, I boarded the transport and did not look back. And when you leave Earth you feel such forces as you've never felt before, the true strength of that planet, the gravity which so desperately clings to you, says in no uncertain terms: 'this is wrong! Please do not go! I will not allow it!' Ah! Then it lets go. You're released. You float! Can you imagine me, as light as a feather, tossed about the cabin? How wonderful an experience that was. If it wasn't so toxic to the bones and blood, I would live in zero gravity.

“But I digress. I arrived at your planet, Mars. Which, by the way, is the most curious thing from orbit. Like Earth yet with a rusty edge seeming at once both old and young. So strongly did it remind me of pepper vines growing upon a heap of tumbled brick. I digress, I digress. In the Aegis I found myself, in that cell on the Aegis. My intimate, monastic chamber on that thrashing, gulping, behemoth. And I see my Coalition friend grow pale at how I describe his vessel. Rest assured, I wouldn't have had it any other way. You need not glow so inhumanly, young man. I mean nothing by it. When my transport first arrived in orbit, I was placed in a wonderfully luxurious room. It was a beautiful, wide room with synthetic windows which like a crystal ball showed me visions of Inarian beaches, skylines, and forests, with noises that so tricked the ear into believing there might be wind upon the portal or rain upon the roof, and even, I realized, with the very scents of my home, of sandalwood and ripe fruit. But what good does such longing do? What future-forward grace can come of that bewitching nostalgia, which while, yes, comforting, still held an eerie distance in it? ‘No!’ said I, ‘no I will not have it. I demand thee—I beg of thee, take me away from here. Deliver me from these phantasms of a home no longer mine. Take me to a place where I can know my new home.’ I was sick of the walls which had been put up around me to shelter me from reality. I wanted to experience her,

the Aegis, as she really felt, not as she was dressed up to feel in some familiar way, deft and subtle as it was. I wanted steel and glass. I wanted the rumble of her engines. I wanted to know her alien sounds and breath in her exhale. Said I, ‘bring me to your smallest room on your oldest deck. Leave behind me these worldly platitudes, as I have left behind my world.’

“And so—though it took much of my authority and all of my talent—so I was relocated to an older deck, normally inhabited only by the burly men of the corps, but an exception had been made on my behalf. In that room I could only just spread my arms—like this, you see, this span—I’m sorry, my dear, excuse my wild gesticulation—from palm to palm the room spanned, and I could feel it pulse through me. You, doctor, maybe you know or maybe you never noticed, but the Aegis has a heartbeat. Ah, but I speak in the wrong tense. For she is no longer among us. She had—and forgive me if I stumble here or there, it’s coming out now and there’s no stopping it—she had a heart! A real heart which I loved. Which ticked in rhythm and never skipped nor faltered. Look at me, I’m weeping. You youth do not want to see an old woman weep, but it is only out of tender love that I offend you with my tears. When I closed my eyes it was as if her thrusters were mine, that I and she were burning hot plasma against the thin atmosphere. And yes, her rings were my rings and together we spun them in their infinite round. Her many hidden passageways became known to me, through which substances flowed that were no different than those that flow through you and I: electricity, oxygen, water, light. And when she breathed in it took near an hour, but it released all at once with a great, aching purge. And I came to believe, maybe foolishly, that she could feel my heart as well. And if she didn’t marvel, for she was older and wiser than I, then she might have found it curious how too my body is made of subtle moving parts.

“And I see your arching brows, questioning eyes. Is she mad? Deficient? Suffer me this

epitaph. If I am in good company, suffer me this indulgence.

“Now she lay dead. Oh, this sallow night! She lay dead in a grave that no hand is august enough to toss dust upon. Thine beating heart is laid upon the earth. No, no, that won’t do. Thine beating heart is laid among the cactus flowers. Thine energy dispersed. Come, good fellows, you’ve heard my dirge. Listen to the wind as she cries...

“And there you have it, as plainly as I can put it.”

Violet stayed silent for a long while.

Chapter Six

Sam's gambit worked. Hummingbird's navigator recognized the signal as an old trapper's code for hitchhiking the Lacework—something they hadn't seen in a long time, and given a few more years might have dismissed as a herd of Marsian deer migrating over the tracks—but this time they picked up on it, and the peculiar, antiquated nature intrigued them enough to track it down, even in the rising storm. The captain sat stone-faced as they explained their predicament, that they in fact had no furs to trade, but would happily part with the lion's share of the supplies from the lifeboat in exchange for safe passage. She told them that her heading was to New Halifax first, but from there she'd head to Prime and they would be welcome to stick around until then. Sam shook on the agreement. They were lucky, she said, that she was light on crew and had room to spare.

Hummingbird's captain, Violet, had an angular face and tucked back ears. She instructed the Earthmen about life on board her train with rhythmic little parables, nearly witticisms, which Luther supposed were rehearsed, but were not stilted in the way an untrained actor delivers canned lines. She would say, "you may indulge yourselves of Hummingbird's many comforts," which a Marsian of lesser

authority might slur over or run together, but Violet enunciated well enough and intoned playfully. Not to be ignored was the strikingly deep timbre of her voice which did not match particularly well her slender frame—although, next to Barney, the Marsian giant, any normal man might seem slender.

They spent the night in the navigation room of the locomotive, watched over by Barney who hunched and scowled like a gargoyle, lurking in the corner of the room. Luther sat in a stiff wooden chair and politely nodded along to conversation, but the drama of the day weighed heavy on his eyelids and soon he was holding up his chin and trying not to fall asleep. To his right at the table was Violet, who leaned back in her chair with her arms crossed and wary eyes tracking Sam, and to his left was Flame of Mawi who had succumbed to sleep and rested on a pillow of bunched up fabric. Sam regarded the train with an attitude that swung pendulously between academic rigor and childlike wonder, pacing around the room and sometimes catching himself before sneaking a look at the contents of a drawer, and sometimes not to stern reprimand from the navigator. Questions poured out of the archaeologist like a leaky faucet, in that even when conversation dried up, they merely dripped out instead. He wanted to know how water flowed into the small sink, and from where, and to where, and what sort of tree had been felled for the wood of the table, and were those hammocks hanging from the ceiling or fishing nets or something else entirely? And what sort of dishes were cooked on the wood-fire stove, which he noted had been fashioned out of a pressure vessel of some sort, given its rounded walls and thick steel, but had been thoughtfully adapted into a new purpose, which was ever so indicative of modern Marsian material culture—Violet answered curtly and impatiently, her initial amicability slipping into a more guarded and irritable demeanor, no doubt as her weariness crept up on her as it did Luther.

As the night ambled on, Sam approached the topic of Hummingbird's history and Violet's reserved posture softened and her monosyllabic answers elongated into more thoughtful responses,

revivifying the atmosphere which had grown to feel like an interrogation. Having finally found the thread which came loose when tugged, he endeavored to unravel the entire story.

“My father had a pawn shop in New Halifax,” Violet said, “so I grew up fixing old, broken things. Lacemen came in all the time and one day I ran away with one. Not because I so admired the lifestyle or anything like that, but I needed to get away to somewhere else. And, after some time, I found myself working the graveyard shift at the docks in Palisade 11, checking boxes for the T.D. company and sleeping out of the longshoreman’s hall. A man named Modest Cooper—who I knew generally, but not particularly—who captained a freight hauler along the northern corridor—who was, by all accounts, a man of integrity, just with a penchant for alcohol and gambling and prostitutes—Modest Cooper comes around and starts drinking and I start drinking with him.

“We get to the point of the night where the road diverges between sleep and regret, but we’re twenty hands deep into a game of Commodore and I’ve won a week’s wages and he’s won the naming rights to my firstborn child—Modest, by the way, and I intend to uphold that, eventually. He goes quiet and looks at his cards and then at me and then he says to me, let’s make this interesting. Well, what do you have in mind? If I win, he says, you take me as your husband. Having imbibed a copious amount of rum, and without taking a look at my cards, I say, deal, but if I win, I get the Bull Frog—that was her name back then. He turns the river and it comes up a red sun. He shows his hand. A measly pair of waning moons. I’ve got two stars and an eighth high—my pot, barely. We laugh it off and the night ends there, and I didn’t even really think about it much the next morning as I’m wrestling with a hangover—they find his body. Lying on a pile of grit salt, small vial of who-knows-what still clutched in his fist. He’d left me the Bull Frog in a note that he handed to the night watchman. That was, oh, twelve years ago—I haven’t played Commodore since.

“I didn’t know,” Barney said, “that this was Modest Cooper’s train.”

“Now you do. If you see his ghost, tell him he still owes me seven-hundred and fifty marks.”

*

The storm subsided. Violet unsealed the engine’s intakes and unlatched the door that led from the locomotive to the crew cabin, the second of Hummingbird’s carriages. Luther passed over the rickety, exposed gangway—quickly, and while holding his breath to avoid inhaling the free-flying Marsian particles—into the narrow, dim hallway flanked by numbered rooms on either side. In room three of six, the room allotted for Luther, he found enough free space to spread his elbows, a canvas bed stretched over a wooden frame which pulled down from the wall, and a small table below the window with a stool tucked underneath it. It reminded him in no sentimental way of his quarters at the Academy.

Luther collapsed onto the bed and held his wrist where his monitor once was, now naked. He pulled out his dictionary between the pages of which still lay a creased and folded spousal approval form, half filled-out. Wherever Amber was on wild Mars, she would be fine. She didn’t need Luther. He’d see her again when they all made it to Central Prime. He’d be back with the medical corps and under the command of captain Hudson—back where he fit best in the whole universe.

“Amber...” the word danced on his lips as he fell to sleep.

*

Luther woke shivering. Hummingbird sat still on her pinions, settled on the track. A coarse woolen blanket—which he somehow came to be wrapped in—did little to keep out the cold. He rose from the bed and doubled back over from a bounty of aches which came either from the utilitarian

nature of the bunk or the abuses of the day before, or more than likely, both. Out the window, the trees and hills and horizon that no doubt lay somewhere out there were concealed by a thick cloud of orange fog. After a minute of searching through the haze, he found the sun's faint disk hanging in the sky, reading about midday.

Luther stepped into the hall and glanced up and down the thin corridor. Under the light of day, the carriage told a different story: underneath the grime and dilapidation shone a distinctly Earthly charm. The walls were paneled with dark wood up to the waist and, above that, faded maroon paper with a print of thin, golden trees. Water marks dotted the ceiling and its ornamental corner molding broke off in places and the gaps exposed the joinery it was meant to hide. No doubt the carriage was a relic of a time when the people of Earth still traveled to Mars for leisure, assembled by an Earth company for the comfort of Earthmen—a long-dead industry by no fault of their own. It might have been elegant once, even decadent, as far as Mars was concerned, but that was a long, long time ago. Now it sat in ugly disrepair. The electric sockets in the sconces were coated in wax from candles. The intricate locking mechanisms had been replaced with crude latches and each knob unceremoniously swapped with a lesser imposter. How undignified—how like a corpse hung from strings and made to dance. Were Luther a hundred yards tall, he'd have dug it a grave and buried it.

Sam's door was shut tight, but Flame of Mawi's nudged back-and-forth on its squeaky hinges. A draft blew into the hall from a sizable gap in the gangway door and chilled Luther's bare feet, but otherwise it was quiet.

“Ambassador,” Luther said, “are you alright?”

Luther turned the corner into Flame of Mawi's room and found her pressing her face to the window.

“Ambassador?”

Flame jumped. “Doctor! You mustn’t sneak up on me like that. I thought you were— anyway, you frightened me. No, it’s quite alright. Quite alright. It’s only that I did not sleep as well as I could have. I know I spoke so fondly of my tight quarters on the Aegis, but I must admit that they were not as tight as this. The bed is simply too small, do you not agree? I can barely curl up on it. Simply too small. So I apologize if I am abrasive or brusque—I merely did not sleep as well as I could have.”

“I’ll see the captain and arrange better quarters. I should have done so immediately. You’re right, this is hardly adequate for a woman of your stature—your station.”

“Young man, that is ever so kind of you.”

Flame of Mawi returned to looking out the window.

“Yes, the captain,” Luther said, “that title somehow feels inappropriate for this sort of operation. Can you really be a captain of a vessel of two? It does not sit well with me that she should share a title with our own Captain Hudson who commands a ship of thousands.”

“Alas, commands no longer.”

“No doubt he will be promptly reassigned to a similar station. As they say, you cannot keep a Hudson down for long.”

Flame of Mawi pressed her forehead to the window.

“Doctor, perhaps you noticed that the train has stopped.”

“I did notice. It’s freezing. Do you suppose the engine needs to be running for the heat?”

“The cold is unpleasant, to be sure, but I believe—if you may entertain my suspicions—I believe something entirely more sinister may be at play in the halting of this train. I have had a feeling that I dare say may have been a premonition, though short of a prophesy, but yes, an intense and eerie

that eyes have been upon us since the storm cleared up—that we’ve been watched by some unknown element of malintent.”—Flame of Mawi grasped Luther’s shoulders—“I thought, perhaps, it might be the strangeness of the time and place that put me ill at ease. Not so! This very moment, before you came upon me, I saw in the distance a group of figures lurking, watching, disappearing before I can fully see what manner of specter they may be. They’re gone now, doctor, but I saw them. The prophecy fulfilled!”

“Specters? Ghosts?”

“Doctor, man of science, it is merely a figure of speech, a trick of the tongue, I don’t mean to suggest the existence of malevolent spirits. I mean to say, if I must be blunt, that we are being followed by marauders—pirates—and they have held up the train—yes, doctor, I believe we may already be too late. I believe they may have boarded the engine and as I speak are taking control of this——“

A gunshot cracked and resonated in the room, chiming out on each metal fixture, lingering in the air and then, even after it dissipated, lingering on the faces of Luther and Flame. It came from outside, somewhere among the dust.

Luther motioned for Flame of Mawi to follow him, whose hand covered her mouth to suppress a squealing scream. He pointed down the hall away from the locomotive, toward the third carriage, the cargo. The captain had told them to stay out of it, but certainly it contained a weapon or a tool or some technology they could use to defend themselves. Flame tip-toed at first, stopped at Sam’s door and tried the handle, but it held tight. She shook her head, looked back at Luther, then ran and swung open the door to the gangway. Flame jumped across the gangway and disappeared into the cargo hold. Luther followed close behind her, craning his neck around to see, but only dust surrounded

the train. Another gunshot echoed through the hall. Luther leaped over and slammed the door behind him.

Inside the cargo hold it was dark and freezing—far colder than the crew cabins, colder even than the windswept jump over the exposed gangway. Luther groped in the dark for some lighting or mechanism and found a crank which squeaked and jammed when turned. He manipulated in the dark until he pulled a pin which freed the mechanism to be spun, and as he did, light began to creep through into the carriage. Slatted windows high up on the wall slowly cast rays of dim sunlight into the room and through its glassy cargo, its cloudy and blue bricks which piled high to the ceiling and playfully bounced the rays amongst themselves. The space was once again tighter than comfortable and the two pivoted in the small space between the bulkhead and the wall of ice. Their exhale turned cloudy and Luther blew warm air into his hands and rubbed them for heat. Flame of Mawi shivered and her hanging jewelry chattered.

“There’s nothing here,” Luther said, “nothing here but ice.”

“Perhaps further down—there seems to be—yes, a passageway. Behind me, come.”

Luther looked down at his bare feet. The metal floor was covered in a layer of sawdust which stuck to his soles, but insulated them from the metal floor. Flame was right, there was a narrow gap between the stacks of ice which they could slip through. She led, again, turning sideways and disappearing into the maze of ice. Luther followed, his footsteps falling in line with the drips of water, falling regularly, in time with his heartbeat. Light danced through the foggy ice, changing colors and playing tricks, sometimes reflecting their nervous faces, sometimes showing forms that were not there. Flame of Mawi’s breathing became short and shaky. Luther grabbed her hand.

“Don’t worry,” he said.

They continued on, and on the other side was a similarly claustrophobic compartment between the wall of ice and double doors that composed the entire back wall, but this time they found a locker containing ice hauler tools—hammers, picks, chisels, saws—and even thick coats and gloves, both of which they quickly pulled on. Luther slung an ice pick through his belt loop and looked for shoes that might fit him, as water now trickled over the floor and wet his feet, but could only find an extra large pair which needed to be tied around the ankle to keep from slipping.

“Good,” Luther said, “now we must decide. These tools will not protect us against invaders in a fair fight, who no doubt have guns and sabers. Yet they likely haven’t seen us, and if we slip out the back now we could hide in the woods. We’re much closer to the Calms now, only a few days walk from civilization, I’d guess. It’d be a hard road, but——“

“No!” Flame of Mawi put her hands up against the ice wall and tried to peer through it. “No! I refuse to leave behind good Sam. He did not leave me behind on the Aegis despite similar peril. I must refuse! If there is any hope that we can rescue him, it’s of the utmost importance that we do.”

Doubt crept onto Luther’s face as he also peered through the murky mirror and wondered if indeed pirates lay waste to Hummingbird on the other side, or if something altogether different. Gunshots were a certainty. And then the figures in the haze, which he had some cause to doubt, seeing as Flame of Mawi’s paranoia had evidently began the moment she boarded the train. Survival, he thought, how can he survive?

A pound hit the cargo bay door. Flame of Mawi screamed.

“Quiet!” Luther hissed.

Another hit—a fist fell heavy against the door.

“Help!” came a muffled voice, “help!”

Luther unlatched the door. Flame of Mawi grasped at his shoulders, attempting to pull him back, but ran into the icy bulwark, unable to retreat far enough back. His arms restrained, he kicked open the door. Barney lay on the ground there, covered in blood.

Chapter Seven

Once the storm had subsided and the Earthmen quartered, Violet found herself alone for the first time in nearly a day and longed for solitude. She turned her attention to Hummingbird's maintenance, as nothing revived her quite like setting her mind to a mechanical task. Not even sleep compared. She'd been host to travelers before—in the recent years, when her crew winnowed down to just a few and then just her and Barney, she'd taken to ferrying between Prime and New Halifax, sometimes as a favor and sometimes for a fee, but even before then it wasn't infrequent that Hummingbird buzzed with transitory folk—yet in all those years, never before had a guest irritated her so thoroughly. With any luck, they'd be out of her hair for the rest of the trip—and to be fair, the supplies they brought with them were more than worth the hassle of a few nosy Earthmen. Among the haul, even, was a quarter pound of evaporated coffee which Violet had tucked away in a safe place.

“Barney,” she called up through the voice coil to the navigator's room, “I'm hearing some grinding in the port-side turbine that I want to get a closer look at. Can you moor her for a short while?”

“Aye,” Barney’s tinny voice carried back down.

The engine’s chug elongated with the slowing of pistons and compressors, some of which were exposed to Violet on the engine’s interior wall, most were deeply embedded in its throbbing body. Yes, a grinding noise stood out underneath the normal cacophony—the symphony of pins and gears and valves—the thumping undertone and low creaking which came in waves, with small crinkling sounds of metal pins or screws that had come loose and danced in their cavities or tapped against glass—that lullaby which she’d grown to know by heart and in which she tolerated no interloping voices.

Hummingbird was no stranger to a dust storm, frequent as they were outside the Calms, but that night was no short of a calamity. The normal procedure of building up pressure and clearing out all the intakes had gotten her running, but it behooved Violet to be twice as careful on account of the singular circumstances, of the flying city which had tumbled out of the sky and crashed into her planet.

Barney lumbered down to the engine room and watched Violet as she set about her work. He knew well enough not to interrupt her when she was arm-deep in machinery, ratcheting and easing, releasing the pent up tensions she held—that is, held in the engine, though a similar relief washed over Violet too—and prepare it such that Violet might begin taking it apart. When she removed the first plate, she slid on her back on the floor and sat up.

“V,” Barney said.

Violet nodded and then swung back around to continue her diagnostics.

“The turbine, I think,” she said, “more than likely dust forced its way in and grease is clumping around the particles. I’ll need to clean it out.”

“We didn’t need to stop for that.”

“I can’t take a risk on this, Barn. If we blow a turbine on the way back to New Halifax,

it's over. Hummingbird is scrap—I can't afford to replace something like that.”

“Grit in the grease isn't going to blow the turbine.”

“What do you know?”

The bookcase creaked under the weight of Barney's lean. He sniffed. Violet removed another plate, exposing the cylinders of the turbine casing. Just as she expected, there were clumps of grease pilling in the nooks of the mechanism. Violet unbolted the pieces and pulled them out one-by-one, tossing the bolts into a box of mixed hardware and laying the parts out onto a stretch of fabric. When the whole turbine lay dissected in front of her, she grabbed a rag and started scrubbing off the tainted grease.

“What a lousy group of Earthmen, huh?” she said, “Earthmen, with all the disparaging intonation I can muster. I can't stand an Earthman. Never could.”

Barney sniffed again.

“Do you think,” Violet said, “that scientist will write a paper about us? Submit it to the academy? Rare, native Marsian ice-haulers—a close look at an exotic, dying breed! Maybe they'll stuff us and ship the whole train to Earth for a permanent exhibit. I tell you, Barn, not even the inspector general of Fortress V asked so many questions.”

“I about tossed him overboard.”

Violet snorted.

“And the diplomat,” she said, “how tiresome is the stereotype of the bright-eyed ambassador? Though novel to find one before the disillusionment sets in. It won't be long. But the question remains, how will she cope? Alcohol and synth? Violent outbursts against her Marsian servants? I reckon she'll be the hypochondriatic type, drinking only distilled water and wearing

protective gloves, certain that any pin prick will carry with it a deadly Marsian debilitation. Yes, I suppose she'll be one of those. Earthmen are such soft creatures.”

Barney leaned harder.

“And shan't I forget the soldier who I host in my very own home! If Verity could see me now—a Coalition thug living under my roof, eating my food, granted the protection of my vessel. He stinks of Earth. He stinks of the Coalition—of that whole rancid planet and its people.”

“Violet——“

“Barney, toss me into Trans-Neptunian space, into the desert reaches, until the sun shrinks into yet another star. Anything to get away from Earth. I admit, to my shame, that seeing the Aegis fall, I thought briefly we may be free of their meddling and their impositions—what a fool I was to think the solar system ever might not revolve around that planet—that planet of cowards and toads and shiftless, incompetent, loathsome——”

“I was born on Earth,” Barney said, “I know you don't mean anything by it, but I'm an Earthman too.”

Violet turned to see Barney's shadow retreating behind the bookcase.

“Barn,” Violet said.

*

For good measure, Violet disassembled and cleaned the starboard-side turbine too. She cranked the manual driver and set the whole machine spinning and pumping and singing, and she couldn't help but smile when she heard no trace of that interloper sound. She tossed her tools back into their boxes and wiped the well-earned sweat from her brow. She reached for the voice coil to signal up that repairs were finished, but held her hand. The cold began to set in as the beads of perspiration

chilled her skin. She pulled down her fur-lined leather jacket from a hook on the wall and wrapped herself in it. She fished through the pockets. The package of coffee was still there—more like a brick, packed as tight as it was. She turned it over in her hands and lingered on the stamp which was pressed into the front, which inscribed those ugly splotches called continents. She wished she didn't, but she knew them by name. Violet tossed the package onto a shelf.

She slipped back through her cabin, through the bookcases and cabinets and chests which were bolted and lashed together, forming the walls and the tables of her makeshift room. Hanging bottles chimed as she brushed by them. In the small foyer at the aft of the locomotive, she climbed up the ladder to the navigation room. Stubborn particles of dust still danced in the rays of midday light. She ran cool water over a towel and wiped down her face.

“Barney,” she called down to the navigator’s pit, “Barney, are you there?”

Violet tentatively stepped towards the bow, but stopped to hang up a long-dry lantern sitting out on the table. It settled into its spot among the other dull lanterns hanging on a wire.

“Barney?” she called again.

She took the step down into the pit and leaned over the navigator’s chair. Empty. Barney couldn't have hidden his frame behind it if he tried. The windows of the pit cut a thin horizontal strip out of the landscape across the bow of the locomotive. They had a cover that raised and lowered like an eyelid, but never revealed more than three palms-width, then revealing the haze that still sat thickly around the train, very nearly a single solid color, as if the window had been painted over. Violet wondered how Barney had navigated them down from the mountains with visibility being as it was. Reading the echoes off the Lace was one thing, but had he memorized the rails so thoroughly that he could trace his way back blind? His intuition for Marsian travel was second-to-none, in her humble

opinion. Second-to-none.

As Violet leaned forward to stare deeper into the haze, thinking then that she saw some warbling form amongst the solidity, which may have been a trick of the light, or might have been a dancing dust devil—a gunshot cracked, its light dispersing through the dust, its bang and crackle echoing through the cabin. Violet’s hand twitched straight to her holster, but she’d left her glimmer pistol down in the engine room. Three heavy stones sunk to the bottom of Violet’s stomach: Barney absent of his normal haunts, a Coalition soldier quartering on her train, and an unaccounted for rifle discharge. Violet gripped the shoulder of the seat and listened, but no further sound of struggle or danger rose above the vessel’s natural creak. She launched herself back through the navigation room and hopped down the ladder. Through the foggy portal window between the locomotive and crew cabins, she saw movement—frantic shadows. Her gun belt still hung from the wall where she’d left it. She strung it on and pulled out her pistol.

She unlatched the gangway door. Wind blew in from outside and thrust itself through the opening, sending Violet staggering, planting her back foot, and covering her eyes. She regained her posture and stepped into the gangway, throwing her shoulder against the opposite wall, the bulkhead of the crew cabin, and peered into the circular window down the hallway. More movement, but the dust-caked glass obscured more than it let through.

Portside, among the dust, a dark shadow loomed.

Violet fired her gun into the haze and then ducked through the door and into the crew cabin.

She held her place for a few seconds, holding her breath. After the smoke of her discharge dissipated, she leaned back through the open door and scanned for the figure off port. Nothing. Solid dust again. Behind her, the hallway was empty. The doors to cabins three and five were open—the

ambassador and the soldier—but no sound, no more movement. The scientist’s door was closed.

Violet moved down the hall and cleared the two open rooms, shutting the doors once she’d done so.

She quietly unlatched and stepped into room four, adjacent to the scientist’s room, and listened against the wall. Tentative steps, rustling, punctuated by nervous silence.

Violet unscrewed an opaque glass covering high up on the wall which she knew had no twin on the other side and thus gave a peephole between the two cabins—a feature mirrored in the other occupied rooms which she’d arranged for that reason. Standing on the desk and leaning against the wall, she peered through the gap and saw the scientist alone, pacing in his room.

He mumbled to himself incomprehensibly and grabbed clumps of his hair, tugging as if to pull an idea straight out of his brain, but it wasn’t coming easily. He put his ear against the door and listened to the hallway then sighed in relief. He pulled out his bag. Out of it, he lifted some spherical object wrapped in a shimmering fabric. He held it gently like some great egg and made sure the fabric fully covered it. He pulled out the bed from the wall and removed one of the limbs which made up the frame, exposing a cavity underneath just wide enough to tuck the sphere inside, and packed it in with a spare blanket.

In the hall, some door swung open and a thunk hit the floor. Violet leaned out and pointed her pistol at the source of the noise. A dead deer lay bleeding on the carpet.

Luther climbed in over it and glanced over at Violet, but ignored her—ignored the barrel of her gun.

“Don’t move,” Violet said, “I will shoot you, soldier.”

“It’s your navigator,” he said.

He grabbed an arm like a thick rope and hauled Barney through the door and beside the

dead deer. In stark contrast, Barney's chest heaved and with each heave blood pumped from a wound in his shoulder. An unmistakable injury: the speckled burns and deep cleft of a glimmer pistol's discharge.

Between labored breaths, he managed to say, "heard deer—went hunting——"

Chapter Eight

Violet and Luther helped Barney across the gangway—thankful that he could still stagger, otherwise they wouldn't have been able to move him at all—across the gangway and into Violet's cabin then onto the cushioned window seat. Luther held pressure to the wound, though blood still seeped through his fingers and left puddles on the floor, stains on the upholstery. Violet and Sam stood behind and watched the medic begin to work, though Flame had felt faint at the sight of such a river of blood and gone to lay down in her cabin. Barney's face twitched, but his eyes were shut.

Luther peeled his hand off. The open wound was crusted in dusty coagulated blood, constantly refreshed with new gore, pumping out like an oil well. A punctured artery, most certainly. Luther reapplied pressure and turned to Violet.

"The supplies from the lifeboat," he said, "there were auto-injectors, right? I need you to go find me a blue one with a triangle on the side."

"Blue triangle," Violet said, "I think I remember one of those. I'll find it."

Violet sped off up the ladder to the navigation room. Sam held onto Barney's boots as he

convulsed. Color rapidly drained from the navigator's face and Sam began to take on a similar pallor, his lips tightened into a frown.

"Is he going to be alright?" Sam asked.

"I don't know. He's lost a lot of blood. If I were back on the Aegis—if we were on Earth—but here, in this place, I don't know. We should be in a clean room by now. The bacteria are already multiplying. The scar tissue is already forming. His organs are going to starve for blood soon and I won't be able to synthesize any more."

Violet returned carrying a small injector pen which she handed to Luther. He slammed it into Barney's uninjured shoulder and quickly he ceased his shivering and went limp.

Violet gripped Luther's shoulder, "What did that do?"

"I sedated him."

"He needs surgery—you're a surgeon, aren't you? What else do you need?"

"What I need is a clean room. How far out are we from a settlement? The nearest place with civilized facilities for treating the wounded—if I keep him under and keep pressure on the wound, I can keep him alive for 6, maybe 8 hours. Here, in this place, I cannot do anything for him."

"You—" Violet retreated to the engine room.

"Surely there's something," Sam said, "it's not a damaged organ. Is there really nothing to be done?"

Violet returned wearing a thick, leather glove and holding a metal rod, the tip red hot.

"Get out of the way."

Luther kept his hand firmly held to the wound.

"You can't! You're going to make it worse. You don't know what you're doing."

“I know that you refuse to do anything. I know that you call yourself a doctor, but you’re not. You’re a supervisor. You want your machines and nanobots to do all the work for you. Well it doesn’t work like that down here—and if you won’t, I will.”

“Don’t!”

Violet brought the rod down onto the wound, plunging it into the back of Luther’s hand. He screamed.

“Move!” Violet shouted.

She brought down the rod a second time, but Luther did not yield the pressure on the wound.

“Move!”

“I’ll do it!” Luther said, “I’ll do it. Give me the rod and I’ll do it.”

Violet looked at the two bleeding, branded circles on the back of his hand. She looked at Luther whose sweat dripped to the floor and chest heaved.

“Take it,” she said.

He grabbed it with his steady hand. He wedged his elbow against Barney’s chest and sat his wrist in the crook of his other elbow to stabilize it. He focused on the part of the wound where the blood flowed from and pictured the exposed artery in his mind. Violet’s instinct wasn’t wrong—it could be cauterized, Luther knew that, but—

“Doctor!” Sam shouted.

Luther brought the rod down onto the wound. Blood sizzled around the rod as he held it there.

“Alcohol,” Luther said. He dropped the rod to the floor.

Violet pulled out a bottle from one of the shelves and put it in Luther's shaking hand. He washed out the blood and the dust from the gash. The blood flow slowed to a trickle. Luther sighed and dropped the bottle too. Violet brusquely walked off.

Sam put a hand on Luther's shoulder and said, "good job, son."

Luther set about cleaning and closing the wound with the small kit he'd assembled when they landed which thankfully had sterilized needles and fine medical thread. He did it all with his non-dominant hand, the one which hadn't been branded, and it took him twice as long as it otherwise would have. Other smaller wounds speckled Barney's shoulder and part of his face, but only needed to be disinfected and bandaged over.

Once he had finished, he collapsed onto the ground. He held up his hand so that he could inspect the wound with the light coming in through the window. The two marks overlapped, forming a pair of interlocking rings. He disinfected them and bandaged it over. They would scar over and there was nothing he could do about that.

*

Luther washed his hands in the small sink in the navigation room. Bloody water circled the drain. Sam had gone to check on Flame of Mawi and the captain had disappeared who-knows-where, so he stood in solitude, but that didn't bother him too much. His limbs and his head were heavy, crashing down from the frenzy of the day. Luther's paranoia turned out to be unfounded—Flame's too, though that didn't help alleviate his sense of guilt—there were no pirates, only resourceful Barney making use of the land.

Up from the pit, the navigator's chair creaked.

"Is somebody there?" Luther asked.

“No.” It was Violet.

“Captain, I——”

“I shot him,” she said. “I’d gotten it in my mind that there was mutiny brewing. Saw somebody, took my shot without a second thought.”

Luther pulled out the ice pick which was still slung through his belt. He shook his head and put it down on the table.

“He’ll need a few days of rest to heal,” He said. “His shoulder might never heal properly. Captain, if we tried to find a real medical facility, I could have healed him like he’d never been shot at all. There wouldn’t even be a scar.”

“You really don’t know, do you?”

Luther walked through doorway and took a step into the pit. A sunset lit up the rolling hills which spilled out before Hummingbird. The dust had finally settled.

“Next time I give you an order,” Violet said, “you follow it.”

The sun dipped below the horizon. Stars filled the sky which stretched out unmarred by any human structures. No satellites, no space stations.

The voice coil flickered on, “Violet.”

“Barney,” Violet said.

“What’s he doing up?” Luther said, “the sedative should have knocked him out for at least a whole day.”

“Violet, the ice,”—he breathed heavily—“the ice is melting.”

Chapter Nine

A third of the cargo had disappeared into the soil underneath Hummingbird by the time Violet resealed the cargo bay. She'd lose even more reshaping the blocks, but that could wait for New Halifax—it could wait for Barney to get back onto his feet.

“It’s just ice,” Luther said.

He sunk to the floor of the brig—a steel cage they called the ice box which, in a poetic twist of fate, had until recently been completely blocked off by the cuttings as Violet hadn’t expected to put it to use. Barney locked the door and tossed Violet the key.

“Remember to change the bandages,” Luther said.

“Give it a rest,” Violet said.

#

Violet sat in the navigator’s pit as the Marsian nightscape unfolded before her. Flame of Mawi hunched over the back of the chair and enunciated over the churn of the engine.

“I’ve come to bargain for the release of Luther, who I believe to be falsely imprisoned.”

“Listen, princess——“

“Ambassador!”

“—as far as I’m concerned, Coalition soldiers are no longer welcome to walk free on Mars.”

“Be that as it may—and I accept that the relationship between this planet and mine is at the moment unclear—be that as it may, I find this punishment to be cruel beyond commensurate with his actions—our actions, I should say, as I was party to the destruction of your property as well.”

“It’s not the property, it’s the principle.”

“Then shall I invoke a more principal principle? Love, captain, love for your fellow man—your brethren of the human race who deserve the opportunity to make amends.”

“Don’t patronize me.”

“Very well, captain, very well. I see you are a woman of practicality—I garner that you are deeply familiar with this windy road we call life—that your boat has been rocked, one might say—your train derailed more than once—not to imply, of course, necessarily, that I see this in your eyes or the lines on your face, which to be clear are unmarred by the tracks of time, youthful, beautiful even, only that I see it in the way you carry yourself—in the way you control your domain like a paranoid imperator, securing your borders, expelling heretics——“

“What’s your point? I hate a metaphor.”

“What I mean, in brief, is that I will pay. I will furnish the funds to make up the difference in your haul, your profit margin. The Inare court will happily compensate you for any damage incurred during the course of my rescue.”

“I don’t want your money,” Violet said, “you paid your fare. You don’t owe me anything

else.”

“Labor, then! We shall work to earn our keep.”

“I certainly don’t want your labor. I want you off my train as quick as possible.”

Flame of Mawi huffed and crossed her arms, leaning on the back of the chair to look out at the Marsian night. The Milky Way splashed across the sky.

“The stars,” Flame said.

“What?”

“I hadn’t noticed before, but they’re the same as on Earth. I don’t know why, but a part of me expected them to be different.”

Violet quickly found Phobos, having grown a sensitivity toward it from a lifetime of stargazing, but it was pale and faint against the sky. She thought to point it out and explain to Flame of Mawi that it made all the difference, but there, right then, it looked like such a small thing.

Violet held up a key ring.

“Let him out,” she said.

“Captain! You are a lighthouse in the storm, a mountain above the clouds, a monument to all that is good and humane——“

“Before I change my mind.”

Flame of Mawi snatched it out of her hand.

“I knew you’d come around. Your navigator told me you weren’t so cold-hearted.”

*

Hummingbird stopped by a creek to load back up on clean water. With the dust in the air, they’d shuttered all their rain catchers and had nearly depleted their cistern, which caught Violet off

guard, but made sense when taking into account the three Earthmen drinking and bathing. With Barney still laid out, she recruited Sam to help her.

Violet stood on top of the locomotive. “That’s right, in the water—get the whole thing under—no, just the opening—alright, hold it there.”

With rolled up sleeves and pants, Sam wrestled with a large articulated pipe, keeping its mouth submerged into the river. Violet cranked on the pump and water began to course through it, leaving a dark trail on the translucent pipe as it ascended. When she heard the sound of water pouring into the cistern, she called down to Sam.

“Hold it there, I’m going to go check on the tank.”

“Aye-aye, captain!”

Violet squinted down at the scientist. The edge of his mustache had slipped into his mouth and he puffed at it like he did his pipe. He was soaked from creek water and from sweat and his clothes clung to his stout body which bulged in odd places. But he wrangled the pipe as she’d asked and didn’t complain—even seemed to enjoy it—so Violet held her tongue.

She hopped down the hatch into the navigation room and made her way to the crew carriage. Luther’s door was slightly opened, but when she peaked inside she saw he was asleep. She unlatched the door to Sam’s room and took a step inside.

“Professor?” Luther called out.

Violet tensed and froze. It was her train, she was free to go where she wanted, but hardly wanted to come up with an excuse for why. Perhaps she was checking the heat coil or a water pipe which ran along the wall—they were stopped to take on water, after all. Or perhaps she would simply say that she had seen Sam hide something and wanted to make sure he wasn’t smuggling something that

would get her in trouble at the docks. Hummingbird was a vessel of legitimate business with a stellar record, in New Halifax, anyway.

The soldier's door shut closed.

She breathed out and stepped over to the rack on the wall which pulled down into the bed and dragged the rope across to bring it down, but only let it descend half way. In the cavity beneath the bed, lit up by a sliver of light through the crack made by the incomplete engagement of the mechanism, there was nothing. Empty. Whatever he'd put in there, he'd moved somewhere else.

Violet pushed the bed back up and left back through the hallway, back up the locomotive to the perch where the water was overflowing and running down the side of the train, and down below in the creek Sam still wrestled the pipe, resolutely holding its mouth below the surface.

*

Having taken on more water than they could carry, Violet siphoned off a portion to fill up the ceramic claw-foot bathtub in her cabin for a late-night bath. Second only to Hummingbird herself, that bathtub was her prized possession. Nothing else like it existed on Mars. It was the sole piece of furniture that wasn't bolted down to the floor as it weighed a good couple hundred pounds and wouldn't budge even when Hummingbird took daring turns, lifting clean off one of the rails. Normally it was filled with tall cylinders containing maps and, in a couple of them were paintings, but now those were piled on the floor and wisps of steam lifted off the water. It was an indulgence, a waste of water and firewood, but every now and then that was the kind of thing she needed.

She stepped into the warm water, settled down, closed her eyes, then heard a creak on the other side of the bookcase.

"Violet?" Barney had stirred awake in the window seat.

“It’s me.”

Water sloshed. Dim starlight filled the room. A small window was cracked open and a cool midnight breeze slinked in through the gap. Barney couldn’t see her, but she felt naked anyway.

“I’m sorry,” Barney said.

“For what? I’m the one who shot you.”

“You know for what.”

“I suppose I do.”

“Why are we stopped?”

“Water. Those Earthmen go through it like fish. I guess I could have kept her going through the night, but what’s the rush? Hurry back to Bart Daily just so he can shake us down for our dues? Nothing for it, but you can’t blame me for dragging my feet.”

“Can’t blame you for that.”

“I think I’m going to have to be put her up as collateral—if the bank will even give me a loan, that is. You ever think it just ain’t worth it, Barn? You ever think you’d be better off working a mine or a field for the day’s bread?”

“No.”

Violet sank into the water. “Me neither.”

*

Barney slowly, methodically dressed the deer which had been on ice while he recovered. His injured arm was tucked into a sling and tightly bound to his chest. The crew sat quietly in the navigation room and watched as he lifted out organs and peeled back skin with just one free hand. Sam sat upright in a seat by an open window and puffed his pipe, blowing smoke through the portal.

“It’s a nasty habit,” Flame of Mawi said.

“Yes, well, I’ll run dry of tobacco soon enough, don’t you worry. Unless, of course, the captain has a quantity in store and would be willing to negotiate?”

“I’ll be selling an arm and a leg once we get to New Halifax just to cover the company cut. If I had any, you’d bet it’d be up for sale. No luck.”

“Violet, I must once again implore you to let me reimburse you for the damages. The Inare court will be ever so grateful for your services in delivering me safely back to civilization—they may even reward you of their own volition. You have done my people a service. Accept our boundless gratitude!”

“No,” Luther said, “I’ll pay. It was my mistake. I’ll pay.”

“I don’t want your money—either of you. You patched up Barney, that makes us even.”

“Yes,” Sam said, “how is our helmsman?”

“Barn?”

Barney dropped a shank of deer-meat onto the counter top. He pulled a thin knife out of a drawer and began slicing it into evenly-sized fillets.

“Fine,” he said.

“He’s fine,” Violet said.

“I wish he’d let one of us help,” Luther said, “he shouldn’t be moving around like that—he might reopen the wound.”

“I’m sure you’re handy with a scalpel, medic, but Barney is an expert carver and I need that hide intact. Don’t worry about him, he’s been through worse.”

Sam puffed another cloud out the window. “If you’re cooking those up now, make mine

rare. Marsian venison is tough as it is.”

“Oh! Of course!”

Flame of Mawi jumped up and inserted herself into the galley, rinsing off her hands, and then loading a few raw fillets onto a wooden board. Barney shuffled to the side and made room for her. She approached the stove and tinkered with it, but made little headway in getting it working.

“Let me,” Sam said, snuffing out his pipe.

He grabbed a few logs which were stacked behind the stove and stripped them of their bark, then tossed them onto the iron cradle inside. Striking one of his long matches which he used to light his pipe, he set the bark alight and blew gently onto the smolder until it caught. Quickly the logs began to burn and the room flickered in firelight.

Sam shut the front grate. “Give it a minute or so to heat up.”

“I thank you kindly and profusely. Captain, how would you like yours cooked?”

Violet liked hers rare, too.

Chapter Ten

Flame of Mawi and Luther set about cleaning Hummingbird. This was to be their recompense for the damage they had done, as Violet would accept no other form of payment—and indeed, would neither accept their tidying of her vessel, but once tidied was loath to replace the mess. Violet’s quarters and the engine room were off limits—and, of course, the cargo bay too—but begrudgingly they were allowed to dust and sweep and rearrange the crew carriage and navigation room. Flame mercilessly challenged Violet for her hoarding instincts, laying upon the table, as Luther saw, six cracked spyglasses, three salvaged window panes, an ornamental wooden snake, and twenty-two glass-encased beetle specimens which Sam purchased on the spot. Violet stomped and protested, but given her resolve to cover the lost cargo herself, she saw the value in weighing what was needed against what was not and allowed it to continue.

One of the cabin doors had been sealed shut with nails and Luther inquired after it to Barney who tossed him a hammer, which he showed to Flame of Mawi who, tantalized by the prospect, exuberantly tore out the nails despite Luther’s hesitant second-guessing. Rather than a cabin, it was a

cramped, skinny stairwell which curved in a tight bend up to the second floor of the carriage. Flame bumped her head ascending it and gasped when she reached the top.

“What is it?” Luther asked.

“It is style! It is glamor! How callous must one be to lock such a place away?”

It was, in fact, an observation deck where once upon a time Marsian travelers gathered to sip beverages and watch the landscape as it rolled by through the windows which generously spanned each wall—windows were so sparse in the rest of the vessel, often leaving the impression of being underground, that the effect was much like climbing out of a bunker and onto the surface. A long emerald-green couch ran through the center and tall, circular tables were bolted to the floor here and there for people to lean against and chat. A reddish-brown wooden counter stood waist-height across the room, no doubt where a barman stood to attend to the guests.

“We closed it off”—Violet had come up behind them and scanned the room with a nostalgic eye—“we closed it off for the heat. These damn windows leak heat like something else. In the end it just made more sense to close the vents and shut the door permanently. And what would I use a room like this for anyway?”

“For the beauty of nature, of course! Do Marsians not crave the sunlight in the way that we do? I am plagued by such depressions without it—this place would be quite the cure.”

“Captain,” Luther said, “our ambassador has made it known to me that she finds her quarters to be, well, cramped. If it wouldn’t be an imposition, perhaps she could make use of this room?”

Violet examined Flame of Mawi who was already alit with the idea, walking around the room, dragging her hand along the rims of tables and across the top of the long couch. She was plainly

too tall for the cabins as they were.

“She’d need blankets and wood for the furnace, but I wouldn’t mind.”

Flame of Mawi moved her belongings to the observation room and allocated a portion of the couch for her bed. During the evening, she would Salon, as she called it, meaning she’d open her room up to anybody who would come and provide intellectually stimulating conversation about art or science or history—which meant it was almost always Sam, who almost always expounded on the Marsian Terraformers, but Flame’s sense of hospitality and propriety ensured that none would be turned away. When Luther made an appearance, only a handful of times on the trip, it was to watch the landscape. He traced the lines of the Lacework along the hills and through the valleys, shimmering like so many silver threads.

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Luther and Flame removed dust by the bucket and soon enough light bounced vibrantly around the various rooms of Hummingbird rather than be absorbed by filth. The accumulated junk marked for sale was piled up in one of the empty cabins to the point where it became dangerous to open the door, as any shift in the pile’s structure could easily send baubles and artifacts crashing into the hall. Artifacts, that is, to Sam who diligently cataloged the items and placed bids for more than a few. He had brought with him a tidy sum of Marsian paper money and was more than willing to part with it in exchange for curios. Soon he badgered the captain into parting with a rigid case—for pay, of course—merely to fit all his acquisitions in. Though he was truly intrigued by many of the items, Luther could tell he was also doing his part to defray the cost of the damage he had done. Violet understood this too, as was obvious in the reluctance with which she bargained over what amounted to little more than trash, but somehow the trade of goods made it more tolerable than the charity, in her words, that Flame and Luther offered.

Barney returned to the helm and, to Luther's satisfaction, recovered a little more each day until he could twist his shoulder about. The doctor fretted about his condition, apologizing profusely for the lack of adequate care, but the navigator waved him off.

Another storm came and went, and the day after that they entered the Calms, so-called because it was spared the erratic weather that engulfed the rest of the planet. Compared the Giant's Workshop which the Marsians used colloquially to refer to, it seemed, everywhere on that planet that wasn't the Calms, it was paradise—nearly as genial as the best of Earth's climes. The storms, Sam explained, were churned up by huge machinery put in place by the Terraformers, and the Calms was like the center of a vortex around which those Giants tinkered in their art of world-making. There was a rhythm to it, he posited, but no one had yet figured out what it was for certain. And wasn't it thrilling, the mystery?

“Ah!” Sam waxed during Salon, “this, my friends, is the beauty of life on the rails! The Lacework is their gift to us, that we might travel Mars even when the sky is cut off to us. The Terraformers gave us this planet in good faith, though it is not without its tests.”

Then, one day, New Halifax appeared on the horizon.

Chapter Eleven

Admiral Virk walked along the wall of his circular office which was punctuated at precisely five-foot intervals by the standards of long-dead empires, and a handful of recently-dead ones which he had lived to watch the end of. Many of them had been dreadful enemies who had locked antlers over irreconcilable differences, killing billions, destroying cities, building terrible weapons of war. Now they hung as equals on his wall, like trophy pelts.

He stopped at a sapphire blue flag with a golden tree in the center. A holographic image of an aging general spoke the record of its final moments.

“History teaches us two mechanisms by which human conflict is unwrinkled: time, which heals all wounds, and domination by which the weak are overcome by the strong, by which the needle of time is pushed forward by the hand of Man. I do not know about you, but I will not wait a moment longer! I will march, arm-in-arm with my brothers and sisters into the future. Yes, by force when necessary—until all these troubles and travails lay long behind us, lay only in the pages of books which detail our bravery. I am a steward of humanity’s great unwrinkling. Follow me, my people, follow me

into tomorrow! I will lead you!”

Raucous applause. End. Moments after his speech, the general was shot. With him went his regime.

“Idiot,” Virk said.

A short trill demanded his attention at his desk in the center of the room.

“Admiral,” his desk terminal spoke, “it’s confirmed. Captain Hudson is dead. He went down with his ship. From the recovered data core, it was otherwise a full evacuation. Three hundred are accounted for at the barrack in Central Prime, most are still missing.”

“Send a message to Consul Akkerman. Relay our condolences for old Venerable ‘Sun-Heart’ Hudson who faithfully executed his duties even in his final moments. We’ll name a Citadel-class after him.”

“Done.”

“Did we recover Aegis?”

“No. Missing. Removed.”

“That unsettles me, Excalibur.”—Virk sat down at his desk—“That unsettles me a great deal. I take it her removal was the cause of failure to maintain orbit?”

“Correct.”

“Scour the records. Find whoever is responsible, kill them, and return Aegis to me.”

“As you wish, admiral.”

The warship Excalibur bounded through empty space, gulping in the nothingness between Jupiter and Mars. Admiral Virk would see to it that order is returned.

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