

RAILROADS OF MARS
CANNONBALL
EXPRESS

KIT KANE

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Devils of Metlac

VERACRUZ, MEXICO - 1936

The locomotive roared through the forest, pistons pounding like mighty iron fists, wheels screaming against the rails beneath. Faster and faster it drove. Then faster still, thundering on down the single track, smoke from its funnel billowing over the three battered freight cars it hauled. And in the engine's rattling, lurching cab, fully aware of the near suicidal speed his train was already approaching, engineer Carlos Roberto Garcia opened the throttle further and made his final peace with God.

Because there could be no doubt about it now.

Even with a thousand boiler horsepower at his disposal, even with the loco at the very limits of its formidable capacity, the object that was pursuing them could not—*would* not—be outrun.

By Carlos's feet, Miguel, the engine's fireman, knelt with his head bowed, babbling a terrified prayer, *screaming* it above the shrieking and clanking of the overworked engineering all around: "Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo, santificado sea tu nombre..."

Carlos shot a glance behind him through the cab's open back—

—and once more felt his stomach clench with terror as the shadow of the thing that pursued them crossed the nearest of the train's freight cars to darken the sides of the coal tender.

Stifling a scream, Carlos whirled front again, shoved the throttle forward, yanked it back a second time. A futile exercise, he knew, but what else could he do? What *else*?

Seconds later, the train screamed around a bend, then on into a clearer section of forest, where Carlos's knotted guts gave yet another lurch of shock, this time at the battered and flaking trackside sign that flashed by outside the cab:

"Atención! Límite de velocidad: 20KPH"

Twenty kilometers per hour! They were surely doing eighty at least! Maybe more! But to curb their speed *now*? With what was following them?

Carlos fired another look over his shoulder—
—and saw the shadow of their pursuer—
incomprehensibly huge, inconceivably fast—clear
the coal tender then begin to creep over the rear
of the locomotive itself...

Sweet Jesus, what was that thing? What was it!

Spinning front once more, Carlos raised his
eyes to the forward window... and felt his
stomach turn over yet again as the grand curving
sweep of the bridge ahead hove into full view. The
Metlac Rail Bridge, highest structure of its kind in
the whole of North America. And beneath it, all
jagged rocks and raging waters, the yawning
expanse of the Gorge of Metlac itself—a third of a
kilometer wide, nearly two hundred meters
deep... and soon to be the final resting place of
one Carlos Roberto Garcia.

Dismissing now even the notion of applying the
brakes to meet the bridge's speed limit—because
death, however it might arrive, would surely
arrive regardless—Carlos sank to his knees beside
Miguel, drew his rosary from a pocket, and began
to pray:

“Dios te salve, Maria...”

The train hurtled onto the Metlac bridge...

“Llena eres de gracia...”

Hit the bridge's deadly curve...

“El Señor es contigo...”

And as the engine's right-side wheels left the

track, Carlos's entire world gave a brutal lurch to port. With a scream of terror, he slammed shoulder first into Miguel, then the pair of them were tumbling helplessly towards the side of the cab. Carlos thudded hard into solid steel, rebounded, and began to roll towards the cab's open rear. Thrusting out one desperate hand, he somehow managed to catch hold of a length of jutting pipework, his body pitching out of the cab into open air but then wrenching to a stop as he held on one-handed to the rough steel protrusion, feet flailing beneath him.

Miguel wasn't so lucky, and the fireman's howl of terror tore at the air as he disappeared through the rear of the cab, plunging towards the churning waters of the gorge below.

An ear-shattering crash followed, and with it Carlos felt the entire derailed train shudder as finally it left the rails altogether, plowing straight through the all but useless safety barrier, then sailing off the side of the iron bridge. Still clinging to the rear of the plummeting locomotive, Carlos closed his eyes, clutched his crucifix tighter still—
—and then all at once it stopped.

Everything.

With a last bone-shaking lurch the entire falling train just... *stopped*.

Still hanging one-handed from the cab, his body dangling helplessly over the gorge below, Carlos

forced himself to open his eyes—

—and in doing so saw what could not possibly be. Saw that the entire train—locomotive, tender, all three freight cars—hung frozen in mid-air, hovering on its side two hundred meters above the gaping ravine of the Metlac gorge, its shipment of coal pouring from the open topped cars in a bizarre black waterfall. For one stunned moment, Carlos actually believed that his prayer had been answered—that God had indeed saved him.

And then he looked up.

Up at what hovered there in the air above him.

Up at the source of the vast shadow that engulfed the train. The bridge. The entire *gorge*.

Whoever—or *whatever*—had sent the object that Carlos beheld, it surely had not been God. *Anyone's* god. Carlos's brain stuttered as it struggled to take in the bewildering apparition floating above the frozen train. Vast, disc-shaped, and gun-metal gray, it hung there in complete and terrifying silence, blotting out the sun. Blotting out half the sky. A hazy glow, like some kind of sinister sunbeam, projected from the belly of the impossible craft, Carlos's locomotive and its three now empty freight cars somehow caught in the beam's shimmering clutches. And behind the countless portholes that circled the object's otherwise featureless exterior, Carlos could make out something else too.

Faces.

It was these last which prompted the doomed engineer's final words:

"Madre de Dios..." he whimpered, and gripping his rosary tighter still, Carlos thought of his beautiful family, made a last sign of the cross... then let go.

As he fell, his eyes never left them. Those faces behind the portholes. Those indescribable faces. And just before his plummeting body shattered on the rocks below, one last word had time to form in Carlos Miguel Garcia's horrified and disbelieving mind:

Devils...

2

Jess

TRANQUILITY COLONY, MARS - 2454

Jess Flint gave the handle of the portable gramophone a final wind, flicked off the turntable brake, and let the soundbox's fresh steel needle come to rest on the spinning shellac disc. For several seconds, groove noise whispered through the vintage music machine's internal horn, until finally, with the merry clatter of a splash cymbal, the recording itself kicked in proper—the infernally jolly sound of the Savoy Hotel Orpheans grooving their way through their 1926 rendition of *Fascinating Rhythm*.

“Sorry it’s taken so long, Mrs. Clark,” Jess said, turning to the little old lady hovering at her shoulder. “All good now though, see?”

And yes, Mrs. Clark could indeed see, Jess noted. Though maybe not for much longer. Because even now a watery sheen had begun to coat the old woman’s cataract-clouded eyes.

“Oh, Jess, thank you so much!” Mrs. Clark said, choking up audibly as the words emerged. “That was *Mr.* Clark’s favorite record you know,” and with a valiant attempt to laugh off her blooming emotions, the old lady pulled a tissue from her purse and began to dab at her eyes.

Oh boy, Jess thought. This was *not* good. Not with the truly horrendous repair bill Jess was just about to inflict upon the poor unsuspecting woman.

Still, in the end, business *was* business, right? Mrs. Clark would understand. Jess cleared her throat. “Um... it... it did need a replacement motor though. All the way from New Detroit, would you believe. Finally came in today.”

And then, just as Jess had feared, Mrs. Clark’s face fell like a drooping windsock. “Oh,” the old woman said, the muscles of her wrinkled neck pulsing as she stifled a concerned gulp. “Oh my... that... that sounds... expensive. Is it going to be... expensive...?”

Shoulders back, chin up, Jess. Business is business...

Pocketing her soggy tissue, Mrs. Clark continued in a tremulous, confidential whisper, “It’s just that... with the air tax gone up again last week and—”

The words were out of Jess’s mouth before she could stop them. “Funnily enough, not expensive at all, Mrs. C,” at which a smile of such intense relief broke out on the little old lady’s face that it was all Jess could do not to grab a damn tissue herself. “Supply guy in New Motown?” Jess went on. “Didn’t charge me a cent. Between you and me, think he might have the hots for petit moi.”

“Oh, Jess, of course he does! Pretty gal like you? Bet you got ’em lining up, eh?”

“... Oh, you betcha. Round the block, Mrs. C. Round the block.”

“Well, here’s what we agreed,” Mrs. Clark said, rummaging once more in her purse to produce a pair of crumpled banknotes. “Thank you so much, Jess. You really are a wonder, you know,” and planting a brief but achingly heartfelt kiss on Jess’s cheek, the old lady clipped shut the portable gramophone, hoisted it under one arm, and began to shuffle her way towards the exit.

Summoning a professional if hard won smile, Jess darted ahead to open the workshop door for her departing customer, before following her out onto the stoop. “Thanks again for your business, ma’am,” Jess managed, waving as a still beaming

Mrs. Clark made her slow but steady way down the dusty main street of Tranquility. Ten seconds later, the delighted owner of a now fully functioning HMV 192 gramophone slipped around a corner to head for home, while Jess Flint, the not-so-delighted owner of a most definitely *not* functioning small-town repair business on Mars, sagged to the stoop of her tiny workshop and issued the mother of all sighs.

Squinting in the late afternoon sun, Jess sat there for a long moment, hugging her denim clad knees as she contemplated the jumble of peeling wooden signage that dotted the painfully short and ramshackle main street of Tranquility Colony.

The Lucky Horseshoe Saloon...

Didn't catch old Franco serving marguerites for below cost, right?

Atkins General Store...

You want beans and franks, you *pays* for beans and franks.

Even the Post Office. Steam-pulled or horse-drawn, mail delivery came at a *price*.

Huffing out another sigh, Jess rose again and turned to go back inside... but then found herself pausing, her eyes drawn, as they almost always were when she began to dwell upon her own situation, *past* the end of Main Street to what lay beyond it.

To the barren but breathtaking landscape of

Mars itself.

Its dusty, terraformed lowlands, shifting eternally with scudding cloud-shadows beneath the yellow of that ever-roiling Martian sky. Its epic, cratered plains, scored through here and there with railroad but still eighty percent unexplored beyond the frontiers of the planet's currently breathable regions. And farther away, on the distant horizon, those towering Martian mountain ranges, bigger by far than anything on Earth, and entirely *unexplored* as far as Jess could make out, though fanciful rumors did persist of long lost rail routes through forgotten mountain passes—routes that would lead the daring (or the dumb) to mythical ghost towns, enigmatic oases, mysteriously abandoned mineworks, all of them forsaken centuries ago by the early settlers for reasons still largely disputed...

“So how much *did* the motor cost?”

The query, impeccably delivered in a soft and effortlessly feminine English accent, came drifting through from the doorway behind, and turning on her heels, Jess slunk her way past the untidy piles of broken machinery cluttering the stoop to step back into her no less cluttered workshop.

“How *much*, Jess?” the voice asked again, reproachful but not unsympathetic.

“Twenty bucks plus shipping.”

“Oh, Jess...”

“I know...”

“You really have to—”

“I *know*.”

From a tiny desk in the single sunlit corner of the workshop, perched primly before a hefty accounts leger and a pitiful scattering of invoices, Vera Middleton frowned at Jess over the rims of her half-moon spectacles.

Trying (and failing) to ignore her friend’s clear displeasure, Jess hauled a rusting tin cashbox from a drawer, yanked open its lid, and dropped into it the money Mrs. Clark had just paid her. The two banknotes joined one other wrinkled specimen in there, while a meager handful of coppers clustered in the box’s opposite corner, as if embarrassed to be in the presence of such monetary royalty. Thirty whole bucks! Woo-hoo!

Slumping into a rickety wooden chair by the workbench, Jess glanced around at the tiny space that constituted her current place of business—essentially little more than a cramped and chaotic cupboard, where shelf after shelf of well-oiled tools gazed down at a dirt floor strewn with today’s scant assortment of the burnt-out, the worn-out and the entirely clapped-out. Food mixers, vacuum cleaners, washing machines—basic, everyday items that folks round these parts could barely afford in the first place, let alone offer Jess a reasonable rate to keep professionally

maintained. Slumping further still in her seat, Jess let her head fall into her hands and muttered, “I *will* still pay *you*, you know.”

“Mm-hmmm. And my therapist’s bills too?” Vera said. “Because this—” and with a prudish, old-ladylike grimace that belied her eighteen years, Vera raised the ledger she’d been working on, holding it out at arm’s length as if she were afraid she might contract something unpleasant from it. “*This*, ducks, is a nightmare. A full-on accounting apocalypse. I am actually *running out of red ink*.”

Jess shot her friend a wry grimace. “Yeah?” she drawled. “Let me fill you up,” and grabbing a nearby knife from the workbench, she placed its business end against her left wrist.

Vera arched one deeply disapproving eyebrow.

“What? Too dark?” Jess said, before sagging again and hurling the knife at the wall opposite. The resounding WHANG-BRRRRRR it gave as it plunged blade first into the wooden boarding should surely have done *something* to raise Jess’s mood. But it didn’t.

“Oh, come on, pet,” Vera said. “What say we... we hit the ’Shoe? Buy you a drink?”

Stifling yet another sigh, Jess was just opening her mouth to reply when she paused. Because Vera’s words—innocuous though they might have seemed to disinterested parties—suddenly struck

Jess as suspicious. *Deeply* suspicious. Cocking her head, she shot Vera a look. “Hang on... You—you—are actually suggesting we go to The Lucky Horseshoe? You hate that place.”

“What? I don’t *hate* it. Yes, it’s not exactly the Savoy, but—”

“Despise the very sawdust on its ill-swept floors’ were your precise words if I... Wait... is this cos *Sally’s* singing tonight?”

And *bullseye!* Because honestly, when God had been handing out poker faces, Vera Middleton had clearly been otherwise engaged helping herself to double quantities of gosh-and-golly fresh-off-the-boat. With heartwarming predictability, Martian-red blushes bloomed on the gal’s alabaster cheeks.

“What? No!” she said. “I... what? Is she? I had no idea. But hey, that’s...” and she tailed off, finally crumbling under Jess’s gleeful stare. “Oh, all right, but you say *one word* to her and I swear I will... severely undervalue your tangible assets.”

“Ooh, gal, talk like that tonight and she will be putty in your hands!”

Vera smiled despite herself and flapped a dainty fist at Jess’s shoulder. It was like being right-hooked by a daffodil.

In actual fact though, Jess strongly suspected that Vera Middleton could quite easily have a shot at Sally Chu. Sally’s tastes and inclinations were famously comprehensive, and Jess had an idea that

Vera, all eggshell pale and quirkily *English*, might be more than capable of charming her way to one half of odd-couple perfection with ‘The Rose of Tranquility’. Not that couples, odd or otherwise, were Jess’s area of expertise, of course. Oh, *Sally Chu* turned heads, no question, that was kind of her job. Vera did too, though she would scoff in entirely sincere disbelief if you even *suggested* such a thing were the case (and Jess had, many times). Jess herself though? If her seventeen born-and-bred years on Mars had taught her anything, it was that the only things Jessica Ashley Flint would be destined to turn here in Tranquility were nuts, bolts, gear trains, and crank-shafts.

But hey, no biggie really.

Gotta love a crank-shaft, right?

Becoming aware of a puzzled silence in the room, Jess suddenly realized she must have said that last bit out loud.

Vera sat there frowning back at her. “Sorry, um... *crank-shaft*...?”

“Eh? I... never mind. I—”

Thankfully, the moment was broken by a loud crash as, all at once, the door of the workshop burst open, and a scruffy ten-year-old boy tumbled into the room.

Jess’s gratitude was short-lived though.

“Jess! You gotta come!” the boy said, his voice a choked gasp of fear. “You gotta come *now!*”

Rushing over to him, Jess grabbed her little brother by his two heaving shoulders. “Bill? Bill, calm down. What is it? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Slinger!”

3

Slinger

Bill's eyes, already wild with panic, were growing wilder by the second, and Jess felt a dead lump form in her stomach.

Slinger.

Grabbing the cashbox from the bench, Jess whirled on her heels and charged out the front door of the workshop, Vera and Bill behind her.

Up the broad dirt road of Main Street the three of them hurtled, a trail of red dust billowing in their wake. From the corner of one eye, Jess couldn't help but catch the fearful looks that followed their progress, etched into the faces of the handful of locals dotting the thoroughfare.

“You okay, Jess?” Franco called to her from behind the swing doors of the Lucky Horseshoe.

Jess didn’t answer. Just raced on past till she reached the end of Main Street, where she lurched to a stop by the tiny cabin that stood there alone on the very edge of town.

Hitched to a rail outside the modest timber built homestead was a horse.

Not just any horse though. Oh no. A towering, impeccably groomed, jet black stallion.

“Oh God...” Jess muttered, exchanging frightened looks with Vera.

But then, marshalling what courage she could, and with Vera and Bill still at her heels, Jess threw open the cabin’s front door, marched across the hall, and burst into the parlor.

“It’s okay! I got it!” she gasped, thrusting the cashbox out before her. “I got it here!”

In the far corner of the room, a tall imposing presence, clad entirely in black, stood looming over the diminutive but straight-backed figure that was Jess’s mom.

“Hey! I said I got it!” Jess repeated. “Mom! Mom, are you okay?”

“Jess, relax, I can handle this,” Abby Flint answered. “I’m fine.”

She wasn’t though. Not even close. The fear in the woman’s eyes was as plain as day, and her *breathing*... a labored, jerking wheeze, even worse

than normal. *Far* worse.

“Mr. Slinger and I were about to come to an arrangement,” Jess’s mom continued. “If he’ll just let me—” But that was as far as she got, and as another painful rasp of air escaped her lungs, Abby Flint stumbled where she stood, reaching for her breather and jamming it to her mouth. Jess heard several rapid bursts of oxygen hiss from the ageing device, her mom sucking them down in desperate gulps even as she slumped farther into the corner.

Once again, Jess thrust her cashbox at the dark shape still towering there. “Take it! You hear me, Slinger! Just take the goddamn money and get out of here!”

At last, the man in black appeared to register the presence of the three newcomers by the door and turned to face them, tipping back the rim of his immaculate lace-trimmed Stetson to reveal a pair of cold dark eyes. Eyes that seemed to leech the very life from the room as the man they belonged to wagged a single slender finger at Jess.

“Now now, young lady,” Slinger drawled. “Cussin’ don’t make no one a better person. Your momma oughtta done told you that,” and with the briefest twitch of a would-be-grin, he turned once more to the figure cowering before him. “Been sparing that rod again, Abby?”

Jess’s mom said nothing, just continued to gulp in air through her breather, airways rattling with

every frantic pull.

“I mean it!” Jess barked. “Whatever we owe, just take it and get out of here!”

At this, and in no discernible hurry, the man called Slinger raised a lone laconic eyebrow, before offering them all a bow of such unmitigated contempt that it was all Jess could do not to take a swing at the scumbag right there and then.

“Much obliged, Ms. Flint,” Slinger sneered, reaching forward to grasp Jess’s proffered cash box with two exquisitely manicured hands... before finally, and inevitably, favoring his captive audience with the full and unabridged Slinger Experience.

Because while ‘two’ might be a full complement of hands for the bulk of humanity, such was *not* the case with Levi Zabulon Slinger. And even as the *first* two of Slinger’s hands set about opening Jess’s cashbox, a *further* pair of the things proceeded to strike a match and light him up a thin black cheroot, while a third and final set fell to picking imaginary specks of lint from the pristine black lapels of his hand-tailored jacket.

As ever, Jess tried not to let the guy freak her out, but man was it a struggle. The mere fact that the illegal practice of bio-supplementing was largely blind-eyed here on the frontier was bad enough. But when a true sadist like Slinger could simply hack limbs off the people he’d killed (killed

legally, the sicko would maintain) then just turn up at his local sawbones for what amounted to a no-questions-asked drive-thru surgical procedure, well then, in the opinion of Jessica Ashley Flint, that was a situation that demanded more than stern language from a failing judiciary.

“So...” Slinger said and, with a purposeful, infuriating delicacy, began to extract notes from the cashbox, “twenty dollars arrears, plus a five dollar late-payment surcharge...”

Jess fought hard to hold back her anger... and failed. “Oh, come on! A thirty percent tax hike with no warning, and then they *charge* us when we’re *one day* late!”

A second excuse for a grin slunk its way onto Slinger’s lips. “You no likee, you go breathe somebody *else’s* air, honey. Or hey,” and here the scumbag shot a further sly glance at Jess’s mom, still wheezing in the corner, “there’s always the Free Zones...”

That did it.

Rage surging through her chest, Jess hurled herself headlong at the man.

“Jess, no!” her mom shouted, Vera and Bill chorusing the same from the doorway behind.

But in the end, two steps was as far as Jess got.

Truth was, she was barely even aware of the guy moving—only of a blurred flash of silver, almost supernaturally fast, as the nearest of

Slinger's four free hands quick-drew a gleaming Colt 45 from one of the six holsters strapped in two lines of three down the man's pant legs. Even before Jess could cry out, the gun's barrel came to rest against the skin of her forehead, and the click of its hammer rang like a thunderclap through her skull.

Jess froze where she stood, heart slamming.

The rest of the room's occupants though?

They did *not* freeze.

With a cry of fury, Jess's mom now threw herself at Slinger too. Vera followed, Bill right behind her.

And three further flashes of silver whipped through the air as three more shining gun barrels came to settle against three more foreheads.

Even Bill's.

Even a goddamn ten-year-old *kid's*.

This time everyone *did* stop, and a bone-chilling silence fell on the parlor.

The fastest gun on Mars.

That's what they said about Slinger.

Right now, Jess was inclined to believe the hype.

With his two remaining hands, Slinger applied the cheroot to his lips, drew in a long crackling lungful, and pulled one final note from Jess's cash box. "Well then, reckon that 'bout covers things. And lookee here! Ya even got yeself a whole five

spot left,” whereupon the grinning enforcer-for-hire tipped the cashbox towards Jess to show her the single five dollar bill still lying inside. “Ain’t that just dandy,” Slinger mused, dropping the box onto a nearby table before gracing them all with a final grin. “Now I *would* give y’all a receipt,” he said, “I really would. But hey, funny thing...” and after twirling each of the four revolvers back into its respective holster, Slinger presented all six of his now empty hands, “... ain’t *none* of these things can *write* worth a hoot. Go figure, huh?”

Jess’s mom was the one who finally broke the deathly silence. “Jess... show Mr. Slinger out please,” and thirty seconds later, Jess found herself standing in the tiny hall of the cabin she called home, trembling with fury and watching through a window as, in the street outside, Slinger mounted his dark horse, spurred it into life with casual viciousness, then rode off to wherever amoral, six-armed gunslingers took their post-work pleasure. Whatever that place might be, Jess doubted she would ever be tempted to buy a drink there.

As the black stallion’s hoofbeats faded into the distance, another sound drew Jess’s attention back to the open door behind her—the one that gave on to the parlor. It was a sound that, as ever, broke Jess’s heart even as it stoked her impotent rage—the rasping, painful wheeze of her mother’s failing

respiratory system.

There in the parlor, Bill and Vera perched either side of her, Abby Flint sat huddled on the tiny, threadbare sofa, sucking on her breather like her life depended on it (which, of course, it did), while her lungs rattled like broken machinery. Exactly how much longer said machinery might continue to function at all, Jess could barely bring herself to contemplate these days. Here on the frontier, hundreds of kilometers from the nearest major air production plant, what they were given to breathe *did* supposedly meet minimum standards, but Jess, along with many others in Tranquility, had her doubts. *Serious* doubts. Frankly, there were occasions—and increasingly *frequent* occasions at that—when the clear dips in air quality could put a strain on even the healthiest of lungs, let alone those of someone like Jess’s mom. Someone whose condition appeared to be deteriorating on an almost daily basis. Someone who—

No! Enough!

Jess bit down on her lower lip, drawing blood.

Just... just get yourself together, gal! Right now!

And fighting back the tears, Jess dragged in a deep breath, hauled herself upright, then stepped back into the parlor. “Hey, mom...”



The two hours that followed turned out to be something of a psychological tug-of-war in Casa de Flint—a monumental battle of wills as Jess’s mom, despite her condition, remained determined to make and serve dinner, while adamantly refusing all offers of assistance from Jess, Bill, or Vera (who was, Abby Flint insisted, staying to eat whether she wanted to or not).

It was only once dinner was over and the dishes done that Jess’s mom gave in, conceding that yes, all right, maybe there *was* something in this much ballyhooed *take-it-easy* advice, and that an early night might in fact be in order for her. Consequently, just after eight, she finally retired to her bed, and half an hour after that, a troubled and emotionally exhausted Bill slipped through to snuggle in beside her.

Now, as the wall clock struck nine, Jess stood in silence at the open door of her mom’s bedroom, gazing down on the sleeping face of this woman who continued to give everything for the ones she loved. This woman who would not be defeated. Not by disease. Not by casual inhumanity. Not by the harshest conditions the new world could throw at her. Upon which thought, almost as if the planet itself could read Jess’s mind, a low roll of thunder rumbled its way over the cabin, while through the partially open curtains of the bedroom window Jess noted a skyfull of deep red clouds

beginning to gather, churning like the foam in some titanic coffee cup.

Storm a-brewing out there, Jess thought. Big one too by the looks of it...

Quietly, she pulled closed the door of her mom's bedroom and made her way back into the parlor, where Vera sat by the fire, a concerned frown still creasing her brow.

"How is she?" Vera asked.

Not finding any answer she was willing to voice, Jess thought for a moment, approached the cash box Slinger had dumped on the table, and stared down at the lone fiver inside.

Finally, she turned to Vera. "Still wanna buy me that drink?"



Twenty minutes later, Jess's right hand lay curled around a large glass of iced cola, as her left snatched up two poker chips from the tiny stack she sat before, tossing them both into the center of the green baize tabletop. Opposite her, three pairs of narrowed eyes regarded Jess with practiced disinterest from behind handheld fans of checker-backed playing cards...

... while over at the *other* end of the Lucky Horseshoe saloon, the similarly narrowed eyes of Vera Middleton regarded Jess with something else entirely.

Oh yes, Jess thought glumly, the message in Vera's eyes was abundantly clear. And also, if Jess would only care to admit it, all but impossible to argue with: *Seriously, girl, this is not a good idea...*

4

The Rose of Tranquility

As the coach-and-four rattled to a stop on Main Street, yet another rumble of thunder—the worst so far—pounded the thickening air, flickers of the lightning itself visible behind the dark clouds roiling from horizon to horizon.

Looked like they'd gotten here just in time, Septimus Murphy thought as he hopped down from the coach. Storm couldn't be far off now.

And clearly the driver thought so too, because Murphy had barely extracted his suitcase from the stagecoach's trunk before the grizzled old hombre on the box snapped the reins, yelled something unintelligible, and the vehicle hurtled off again

into the night.

For another moment or two, Septimus Murphy stood there alone in the road, clutching his neat city hat to his city head in the gathering wind, while surveying with a sinking heart the less than abundant attractions of Tranquility Colony.

Eventually, something across the road drew Murphy's attention, and a mere ten dusty paces later he found himself standing before a lamentably insecure security fence, peering through its rusting chain link at the very source of all his employers' displeasure.

On the other side of the fence was a long railroad siding, the nearest of its several stubs of track occupied by three unusually robust, all-steel freight cars. And on the side of each car, painted two meters tall in bright red, was the unmistakable symbol of the Red Cross.

Yes indeed, those were the cars all right. The cars that should have left here by now. Left here *three days ago* in fact. Pursing his lips in disapproval, Murphy shook his head and tutted to himself. How anyone with any kind of frontiersman's heart could seek to exploit such a clearly well-intentioned operation for mere financial gain remained entirely beyond him. Still, that *was* the very problem he was here to solve, wasn't it? So best get cracking and find a room in this godforsaken hellhole before that storm finally hit.

Turning from the rail siding, Murphy glanced back over the road to the only structure currently displaying any signs of life at all in Tranquility—the Lucky Horseshoe Saloon. Honky-tonk piano music, shrill but at least in tune, sputtered its way out through the swing doors of the grime-encrusted drinking-hole-cum-hotel, and as Murphy began to make his way towards the sound, the unseen pianist suddenly rolled out a kind of roughhouse plinkerty-plonk fanfare, the musical flourish prompting a wave of muffled but enthusiastic cheers from the saloon’s patrons. Said cheers were quickly followed by a bellowing, Italian-accented voice:

“Ladies and gentlemen, settle the hell down now, feet off the goddamn frickin tables, and please... *please*... put your hands together for the Rose of Tranquility herself, that mistress of, like, you know, *super* hotness, with a voice of, like, um, *equal* hotness, the Lucky Horseshoe’s very own, the one, the only...”

•••

“... Miss Sally Chu!”

Behind the moth-eaten curtain of the Lucky Horseshoe’s tiny stage, Sally Chu shook her head and winced. As ever, frickin Franco had yelled her intro with all the class of a cage-fighting referee in a crappy mood. And seriously? *That mistress of, like,*

super-hotness, with a voice of, like, equal hotness? Sally made a mental note to write an actual script for the idiot next time. Either that or kick the living crap out of him. *Okay, settle, Sal,* a feeble voice of moderation put in from somewhere. Franco's heart was in the right place really. Though in ten minutes time his testicles might not be. Not if Sally failed to keep a lid on that temper of hers.

Slurping at a beer, Franco himself tottered back into the wings, pausing there unsteadily to raise a foamy glass at Sally. "You go girl!" he slurred in feminist solidarity, his drooping, beer-drenched moustache flapping in the halitotic breeze. "You know I luv's ya, right? Like my own, Sal. Like my very own," aaaand cue more tottering as the venerable owner of the Lucky Horseshoe headed back behind the bar to miscount change and mix up drinks orders.

From the side of the stage, the pianist was by this time kicking out a low and lusty jazz vamp, the punters out front responding to it with a gratifying wave of whoops and hollers. So without further ado (as a rule, Sally rarely went in for ado), the 'Rose of Tranquility' adjusted the waistline of her considerably-less-than-demure showgirl dress, plumped up her already improbably enhanced breasts, and slunk around the curtain to greet the ever eager clientele of the 'Shoe.

"Evening, boys..." Sally cooed over the tinkly

jazz vamp.

Several men whooped.

“And girls...”

Several women did too.

“Well, as I live and breathe, don’t y’all look... mmmmm...” and flashing her killer smile at the goggle-eyed crowd, Sally sidled lazily onto the forestage before draping herself over the chipped and peeling plaster reproduction of the Venus de Milo that constituted Franco’s sole concession to set dressing. Once there, she waited another tantalizing half bar for the piano vamp to come round again, then locked eyes with a positively agape young fella at the front of the audience. Target thusly acquired, Sally went on to purr the whole of the opening verse to him and him alone:

*“Society expects that when a girl gets up to dance
All the virtues of a lady she enshrine.
Society expects the graceful poise,
The modest glance...
But when I hear those trumpets blare,
And Charleston rhythms fill the air,
Society can shove it where
The sun don’t shine...”*

And as the pianist picked it up into verse tempo, Sally blew Positively Agape a winning kiss, playfully flipped off the lad’s hat with a single deft

flick of her Parisian heels, and began to ease her way down the steps at the front of the stage. By the time she'd reached the floor of the house she'd pretty much picked out all her marks, both male and female (Sally was an equal opportunities tease), homing in first on a gaggle of out-of-town city gals as she crooned:

*“Do I raise my skirt a bit
When I'm shaking a shoe?
Do I like to flirt a bit?
Yes, I boop-boop-be-do.”*

The gaggle giggled and clutched each other in excitement, one of them fluttering a lace-trimmed fan with flirtatious abandon...

... whereupon the Rose of Tranquility moved heartlessly on to the spectacularly unkempt miner-type fella next to the group of gals, winding her fingers into the man's close-to-waist-length facial fungus:

*“Will I aim to please the boys
With a shimmy or two?
Do I like to tease the boys?
Yes, I boop-boop-be-do.”*

As it happened though, Spectacularly Unkempt turned out to be something of a minor

misjudgment (Ha! Get it? *Miner* misjudgment. Sally amused herself no end...). Of course, any of the locals might have told the guy that what he did next was singularly inadvisable for those lacking comprehensive dental cover, but sadly, none of the locals had the chance, and as Sally turned away, already scanning for her next target, she felt a hand come to rest on her ass.

Instinct, as ever, kicked in before sense did, and faster than a cat on amphetamines, Sally whirled on the man, ramming forward one satin-gloved fist. There followed a wince-inducing crack, and Sally spotted several incisors plus a lone blackened canine twirl their way from the recesses of Spectacularly Unkempt's shattered jaw as the man tumbled backwards, crashing his way through two tables and a potted plant. The obligatory whoops from the crowd followed, of course, while Sally herself, true to her formidable rep, barely missed a beat:

*"The ladies of this parish
Shake their heads and share a frown,
But when I hear that ragtime beat,
Ain't no one and nothing can hold me down."*

Sadly however, the ass-kicking portion of the evening's entertainment turned out not to be over yet, and as Sally moved on to flirt with a burly

white-hatted fella near the bar, Spectacularly Unkempt climbed again to his feet, while two further mean-faced geezers—pals, Sally guessed—stepped up to join him.

For a moment, Burly White Hat seemed to feel the need to come over all Lancelot la Manly, placing his fine felt headgear on the bar and balling up both fists. But Sally just put an amused finger to the guy's lips. *Chill, dude. I got this.*

And she did. As the aesthetically displeasing trio of Spectacularly Unkempt plus Mean-Faceds One and Two lurched towards her, Sally once again sprang like a cougar, promptly taking out all three with a single devastating fists/feet combo—

—before going on to purr her way through the song's final sixteen bars:

*“So if my date is dapper,
And jazz is part of the brew,
Unto my inner flapper I'm true.
Maybe Velma don't cut loose that way.
Maybe Val got qualms, but still I say,
What Val and Velma vo-de-oh-don't, I—”*

But actually *nope*, still not *quite* over yet apparently, and as S. Unkempt struggled yet again to his feet, Sally gave in to a sigh, snatched an ashtray from a table, and hurled it hard to strike the obdurate old codger square in the left temple.

At which blessed point, thank the merry gods of theater, dude *finally* saw fit to slump to the sawdust-clogged floor, head meeting oak boards just as the pianist banged out the closing chords of the number, thereby allowing Sally to bring the chorus home with a last, perfectly placed:

“—*boop-boop-boop-boop-be do.*”

And the crowd, as they say, went wild.

Hmmmm, nice save, gal, Sally thought as the cheers and hollers rolled on. *Very nice, in fact*, though Franco might be inclined to disagree, she saw, the saloon owner shooting her a look of bleary but fatherly disapproval.

Leaning back against the bar, Sally smiled anyway then tipped the pianist a subtle nod, granting the guy his own thirty-two bars in the spotlight, and as his driving piano rag began to ring out across the bustling saloon, Sally herself turned to order a drink...

... at which point she became aware of a slim, pale figure seated in rigid silence by her left elbow.

Sally recognized the gal immediately—half-moon specs, high-collared floral blouse, rose-infused perfume; it was Jess’s accountant friend, a new-ish arrival here on Mars, if memory served. She and Sally had actually spoken a few times already, though frankly, you’d hardly know it

now. Not by the way the babe was cold-shouldering her.

“Well hey there, English,” Sally ventured—
—at which the gal seemed to all but jump out of her flawless ivory skin.

“Oh, golly, well, um, hello, Sally. Didn’t see you there. Didn’t in fact know that you’d be on tonight at all. Completely... um... unaware...”

Sally let the uncomfortable pause ride for a second, sighing inwardly. Seriously, you could almost feel the waves of *get-the-hell-away-from-me* coming off the gal beside her. But then again, what else should Sally expect, right? Classy babe like that? Drop dead you-know-what too. Even if she *did* like women, what the hell would someone like Miss English Rose there ever see in someone like Sally ‘Cleavage and Come-Ons’ Chu?

Slumping a little where she stood, then mentally kicking herself for being an idiot in slutwear, Sally glanced around for a way to extract herself from the prevailing stench of awkward... and found it almost immediately:

“Hey. What the hell is she doing?”

“Um... sorry?” the English gal beside her said.

Sally didn’t answer, just continued to scowl at the far corner of the saloon, where Jess ‘dung-for-brains’ Flint sat at a card table before a frankly pitiful stack of poker chips, attempting to stare down three of Tranquility’s would-be-finest.

“Oh, um y-y-yes, I know,” the English gal stuttered. “I tried to tell her but—”

Sally didn't wait for the rest. Just hauled up her skirts and marched straight on over, only dimly aware of a faint (and oddly plaintive) “Um... bye then, Sally...” from behind her.

At the card table, a frowning Jess sat poring over her cards, while in the seat opposite, James ‘Daddy’ Dodds, local railroad tycoon and Tranquility's resident cigar-chomping-fat-guy-in-an-expensive-but-tasteless-suit, rolled his eyes.

“Forgive my impatience, honey,” Dodds drawled, “but really, would there by any chance be some sign of a decision forming in that purty, oil-stained li'l head of yours? In or out, dearie?”

Lurking behind Jess's chair, Sally spent several more tight-lipped moments watching her friend glance at her cards and ponder the last of her poker chips... until, in the end, just as Jess's hand darted towards that pitiful stack, Sally could take it no more:

“Girl, have you been sniffing the engine grease again?”

Jess started in surprise and scowled. “I know what I'm doing, Sal.”

“Uh-huh. As does Mr. Wile E. Coyote. Every time. So before you end up nothing but a donut-shaped puff of smoke at the bottom of a cartoon canyon, I would seriously consider reacquiring

some common frickin sense and wishing these gentlemen a pleasant good night,” in support of which suggestion, Sally cranked up her disapproving glower another couple of notches. Then another one for good measure.

But Jess ignored her, turning back to her opponents around the card table and frowning down at her cards again.

It was at this juncture that Dodds chose to offer his own thoughts, eyeballing Sally with a queasy mixture of lust and disdain. “Um, excuse me, young lady,” he said, “and I use that particular term under advisement, of course,” (cue hyena chortles from the two no-neck minders at Dodds’s shoulder) “but this here is a *private* game, so unless you’d care to buy in, I’d suggest you transport that tidy little tuckus of yours into the lap of someone who has *paid* for it.”

Hmmm. All-rightie. So, as Sally saw it, the situation here could now go one of two ways. The first involved the brutal incapacitation of a cigar-chomping fat guy through means yet to be devised but most likely involving objects both blunt and spiky and significantly larger than the orifices they would shortly occupy. The second... ah, what the hell, *screw* the second!

But just as Sally was clenching her fists, a diffident cough popped the escalating tension, and another figure stepped into the drama. The

interruption most likely saved Dodds's already limited prospects for procreation as well as Sally's own two-bit job.

"Ahem, excuse me, Mr. Dodds, sir..."

All eyes turned to take in the new arrival—a small fella in pin-striped city garb, currently shuffling on the spot and wringing his hat between his hands.

At the sight of the man, Dodds gave forth a weary sigh. "*Mister* Murphy..."

"Mr. Dodds, sir," the man called Murphy replied. "I wonder if I might—"

But apparently, he mightn't. Puffing out a reeking cloud of cigar smoke, Dodds fixed Murphy with an exasperated gaze, and the little guy zipped it forthwith.

"Mister Murphy," Dodds repeated, "call me a cock-eyed optimist but I really had hoped that my most recent missive would have made things clear to you and your employers."

"Mr. Dodds, sir, we had a deal. We—"

"And let me enlighten you as to the nature of a 'deal' here on the ol' frontier, Mr. Murphy. Here, a deal is what might be termed a... malleable conceit."

"Sir, these are *medical* supplies. There are colonists in need of—"

"Indeed, Mr. Murphy. Colonists eight hundred kilometers away across highly toxic Free Zone that

no railroader been on for, what? Ten years? Twenty? More?"

"Yes, I know that, of course. I do. If there were any other route, we would be more than happy to suggest it, but time is of the essence here, Mr. Dodds. We—"

"No," and from somewhere deep within Dodds's ample jowls a well-oiled smirk emerged. "I will tell you what is of the essence here, Mr. Murphy. *Money* is of the essence here. Five thousand down or your cargo goes nowhere."

"Mr. Dodds, we really can't—"

"Five K. Take it or leave it, son. And please... call me Daddy."

Sally watched the man named Murphy seethe where he stood for a moment longer, then finally whirl on his heels and high-step it for the bar, leaving Dodds to indulge in a theatrical sigh as he turned once again to the assembled. For a second time, the scumbag's leering gaze came to rest on Sally, and after another carefully calculated beat, a single *do-we-have-a-problem-here?* eyebrow darted northwards on Dodds's pudgy face.

This time, Sally managed to cage the beast—only just though, only just—and at long last, Dodds turned once again to Jess:

"So... where were we, dearie?" he said. "Oh yes," and wafting away another voluminous cloud of cigar smoke, Dodds lowered his eyes to take in

the meager pile of poker chips stacked before the young black woman seated opposite him. Sally doubted the combined value of those chips would keep Jess's opponent in hair tonic for so much as a day, but for James 'Daddy' Dodds, that was seldom the point. Greasy slimeball just liked to win.

"In or out, sweetie?" he said to Jess.

Sally made one last-ditch effort to catch Jess's eye, but nope, gal was having none of it, and with a sinking heart, Sally watched her best friend glance up, lock eyes with James 'Daddy' Dodds... then shove every last one of her chips into the center of the card table.

5

Iron Gods of Mars

Not even ten seconds later, the swing doors of the Lucky Horseshoe crashed open, and Jess Flint charged out into the night, the churning anger in her chest instantly at one with the thunderstorm that, at the very same moment, *finally* began to vent its own fury.

Good, Jess thought. Bring it on, sister. Bring it on!

And it did. Raindrops the size of lug nuts began to pound the dirt road outside the 'Shoe, sending up splashes of red mud like miniature volcanoes. Lightning followed—bolt after ear-shattering bolt of it, slamming into the ground all around in jagged, crackling pillars of electric death. Never

mind the ten million volts, the sound of it alone could kill you on the spot, Jess thought... and stood there regardless.

Stupid, stupid, STUPID! What the hell were you even thinking?

“Jess! Jess!”

It was Sally’s voice, tinged as ever with her trademark sensitivity:

“Get the hell back in here, you crazy bitch!”

Yeah, right. Frankly, the very *last* place Jess would be going in the immediate future was *back in there*, and wiping the rain from her eyes, she stumbled on through the downpour, skirting around to the side of the saloon where two horses stood hitched to a rail. Jess had no idea who the creatures belonged to and didn’t care. Both animals were already lurching with terror at the storm anyway, so really she was doing the owner a favor.

Untying the nearest of the horses—a dappled gray mare with powerful hindquarters—Jess leapt up into the saddle and dug her heels into the creature’s flanks. The horse reared violently, bolts of lightning crashing down all around it, but then, after a single firm haul at the reins, Jess felt the animal submit to her, and a heartbeat later, she and her stolen ride were thundering off into the rain-lashed, lightning-strobed mayhem of the Martian thunderstorm. Shooting a final glance over her

shoulder, Jess was just able to make out Sally, now standing with Vera on the decking outside the saloon, the relentless deluge drenching Sal's showgirl costume from perky chapeau to satin petticoats as the gal mouthed something no one's mother would be proud of. Then both Sally and Vera—Tranquility in its entirety in fact—were lost to the storm behind, and Jess was alone with her guilt and her rage and the ceaseless rhythmic drumming of hoofbeats on Martian soil.

How long she rode for, Jess had no idea. She'd hoped vaguely that the adrenalin rush of her otherwise pointless escape might somehow sap the worst of her boiling emotions and let her think straight. It didn't. Jess's rage continued to churn unabated, and so did the storm, the pair of them swirling with apparently infinite reserves of blind fury. Eventually, Jess dragged the horse to a halt atop a low hill, leapt off, and smacked the animal's rump. Dappled Gray would be better advised to find her *own* safe haven tonight, Jess thought. Because if this day's events had shown her anything, it was that such a goal was not, and never *would* be, among the frankly piss-poor achievements of Jessica Ashley Flint.

“Go!” she yelled at the horse. “Get the hell outta here!” and when another bolt of lightning slammed down nearby, the animal reared up in fright and finally took off.

But then, even as the horse's hoofbeats thudded away into the night, *another* sound suddenly cut through the aural turmoil all around—a *second* set of hoofbeats—and Jess turned to see Dappled Gray's saloon rail stablemate galloping towards her through the driving rain. Up front in the saddle was a grim-faced Sally, while behind her, arms wrapped tight around the saloon singer's corseted waist, sat a terrified Vera.

Pulling the animal to a halt, Sally was on the ground in seconds and barreling straight at Jess. "Okay, girl, enough! This is insane! Are you *trying* to get yourself killed here? You have to—"

But the rest was lost as yet more lightning blasted the rocky hilltop, the horse that Sally and Vera had rode in on rearing in terror before throwing its remaining passenger and bolting off into the dark of the night.

"Jess!" Sally yelled again. "Please! You have to come back! Now!"

"Come back? Come back to what?" Jess hollered through the shriek of the storm. "Next month gonna be no better! Next month maybe we can't pay our air tax at all! Then we're out, Sal! Out! How long you reckon my momma's gonna survive in a Free Zone? How long, Sal?"

A hand grabbed Jess's shoulder. It was Vera. "Please, Jess," she said, rain lashing at her pale face, "we can work something out together! We can! If

you'll just come back and—”

But once again the words were lost as, with a roar that seemed to fill Jess's whole world, the biggest lightning bolt yet struck home, its blinding blue shaft crashing in almost dead center between their three pairs of feet. Jess just had time to feel a brutal blast of heat sear the skin of her face before she sensed something shift below her—shift and then *drop*. A split-second later, the entire hilltop—the entire *planet*, it felt like—seemed to give way all at once as a gaping fissure opened up directly beneath Jess and her friends.

Vera screamed. Sally did too.

Shrieking herself, Jess reached for the others...

... but it was already too late, and with a world-shaking rumble, untold tons of shattered rock avalanched down into the widening crevasse, taking Jess, Sally, and Vera with it into the dark.



Blackness and silence.

Then, fading in slowly, a voice.

Vera's voice.

“Jess? Jess, are you okay? Jess?”

At last, shadowy images began to emerge from the dark, taking their own good time about it but eventually fusing into a kind of blurred semi-coherence. Vera, bleeding a little from a bruised and battered face, stood before a massive rockfall,

concern furrowing her brow as she looked down at Jess, who lay sprawled still on the rubble-strewn ground where she'd landed. From somewhere high overhead, the storm continued to rumble, flickering flashes of lightning filtering down through the dust-clouded air above.

"Jess?" Vera said again.

"I'm okay," Jess said, though several of her joints and muscles took literal pains to disagree. And with some vehemence too. Clambering to her feet, Jess shook the dust from her hair and glanced about. "Sally? Is she—"

"—thinking of kicking your spectacularly stupid ass?" came Sally's dulcet tones from behind them. "She most certainly is."

Yeah, fair enough, Jess thought, and was on the verge of mumbling some kind of feeble apology when another flash of lightning, brighter this time, suddenly lit up the area around her... and the apology caught in her throat.

"What the *hell*...?" Jess eventually managed.

"I know," Vera said. "Strange, isn't it..."

Strange it most certainly was. What Jess had expected to see around her was the narrow, rock-littered base of a newly formed Martian ravine. But instead, their calamitous communal tumble appeared to have deposited the three of them into some kind of cave. Easily forty meters across, the huge underground chamber was unlike anything

Jess had ever come across on Mars, its solid rock walls agleam with moisture and mineral sparkles as they arched their way up to a high, dome-like ceiling, just visible in the sporadic lightning flashes still filtering down from even farther above.

“Subterranean cave system, I suppose,” Vera ventured.

“Uh, yeah, I’m thinking *not*.”

It was Sally’s voice again, and at the sound of it Jess finally turned to face the gal...

... only to find herself pausing once more, a deep frown digging its way into her brow.

Sally, battered but intact, stood just a few meters away, flickering Zippo held out before her, staring at what *should* have been just another section of cave wall... but clearly wasn’t.

It was as if a huge section of the rockface there had been blasted away to reveal something else behind it—a kind of featureless gray surface that looked to Jess like it might be part of something larger that was buried in the surrounding rock.

Something *much* larger.

Scrambling up to Sally, Jess took a further step past her dumbstruck friend, and it was at that point she realized the strange gray surface wasn’t *entirely* featureless after all.

There was a hole in it.

A large, ragged hole,

Roughly circular, the almost two meter

diameter opening breached the puzzling gray wall at just above ground level, whatever lay beyond it still shrouded in darkness.

Frown deepening, Jess reached out and let her hand come to rest on the curiously *blank* surface she stood before. It was cool to the touch, like metal. But it *wasn't* metal. At least, not any metal Jess had ever come across. It wasn't plastic either. Some kind of *ceramic*, maybe?

"Weird," Jess murmured, her probing fingers creeping their way towards the gaping hole in the gray wall, then reaching round to investigate its edges...

... which felt smooth and rounded, almost as if they'd been melted.

Could lightning do that? *Martian* lightning maybe...

Just then, another flicker of blue stuttered its way through the cavern, briefly illuminating a little of what lay beyond the hole, and Jess caught a startling glimpse of looming, shadowy shapes. Shapes vast and angular... but also oddly *familiar*. Well, *some of them* anyway...

Chewing her lip, Jess took a single, halting step forward through the opening—

"Wait! No!" Vera cried. "What are you—"

—and as she crossed the threshold, light returned to Jess's world in full blinding force. Stark white light that rocked her back on her heels,

while revealing in a single heart-stopping instant a world of complete and utter madness.

What the freakin hell...?

The boat was the first thing to demand Jess's full bewildered attention. Easily as long as Main Street, Tranquility, it appeared to be nothing less than a complete iron steam ship, maybe late nineteenth century Earth, perfectly preserved in some kind of gigantic hangar. Bizarre as this was though, it was *not* where the insanity ended. Not even close. Because crisscrossing the vast hangar (if that was indeed what this place turned out to be) was a complex web-work of gantries and walkways connecting a series of huge platforms over multiple levels, each and every one of which was generously stocked with yet more... *marvels* was the word Jess's reeling brain finally settled on.

Having pretty much grown up reading nothing but engineering literature, Jess actually found herself recognizing several of these 'marvels' straightaway. A German First World War tank sat next to a World War Two Lancaster Bomber, itself huddled in the shadow of what could only be a Saturn V rocket. These, though, were the easy ones, Jess would be happy to concede. The objects that had quite clearly been built by human hands.

But there was other stuff too.

Tech of a far more *alien* aspect.

Strange silver craft, surely designed for space

travel, lay beside what looked like a battery of laser cannon gun towers ripped from some extraterrestrial warship. Next to those there loomed a brace of three-legged, all-terrain walking machines, heavily armored and sporting sinister growths of articulated metal tentacles. Once again though, the *easy* ones, Jess thought. Relatively speaking anyway. Because in truth, *most* of these *other* things—these objects of apparently non-human origin—were not so easy to categorize, many presenting as little more than bizarre, brain-frying amalgams of unidentifiable engineering whose underlying principles or ultimate function Jess could barely guess at.

All at once, Jess became aware of Sally and Vera at her side again, the pair of them utterly agape too. Sally was the one who finally broke the stunned silence:

“Um, okay, English,” she said to Vera, “you’re the brains here, right? Wanna weigh in?”

Vera stared back at her. “The brains? Sally, I went to the London School of Accountancy. I really don’t recall a module on intergalactic alien salvage yards.”

“Hah! Intergalactic alien salvage yard! I knew it!”

Vera’s brow wrinkled. “Um, actually, I *was* being facetious, but you know what... if the space helmet fits...”

For another long moment, all three of them just stood there, gazing around at this world-of-batcrap-crazy they'd somehow found themselves inhabiting. Eventually, Vera piped up:

"You do know we're going to have to tell the authorities about—"

"NO!"

Jess and Sally bellowed the word in perfect unison, and Vera's frown deepened.

"Girls, something like this, it's surely of huge archaeological—"

"Vera, listen to me," Jess said. "We call this in, government gonna take it all."

"*Exactly*," Sally said, catching Vera's wide-eyed gaze and holding it. "What do we get? Pat on the head and a photo in the *Tranquility Herald*. Okay, sure, smokin' *hot* photo in the *Tranquility Herald*, but still, keep this to ourselves for a bit and we can, I dunno, maybe break some of this stuff up, yeah? Sell it for scrap or—"

"What? No!" Vera's voice rang bright with shock. "Sally, some of these things are clearly priceless historical artefacts! We can't just go breaking them up like they're—"

"Maybe we don't have to," Jess said. "I think I might have a better idea. Come and see..."

Having taken several more steps into the whatever-the-hell-this-place-turned out to be, Jess now stood on the other side of the iron steam-

ship, where her heart—her *engineer's* heart—was already beginning to race at the astonishing sight of what lay there in the ship's shadow.

Eventually, a puzzled Sally and Vera moved in behind Jess to see what she had found...

... and a pair of startled but entirely warranted gasps quickly followed.

"... Oh..." Sally said. "Oh wow..."

No one moved. They barely even breathed. All three of them just stood there riveted to the spot as they gazed in wonder at what lay nestled beside the great iron steam ship.

And behind Jess's dark, shining eyes, wheels began to turn and plans began to form...



In the end, it took almost no time at all to set things in motion. Jess composed the letter. Vera typed it out. Sally returned to the Lucky Horseshoe, found out the room number of the man called Murphy, and sent Jess's little brother Bill up to hand deliver their missive. No real names in that missive, of course, just some smokescreen non-de-plumes. Best to keep all this low key for the moment, Jess had reckoned. Didn't want to alert the competition...

Murphy's reply had, as Jess had hoped, been all but instantaneous. It wasn't hard to imagine the guy's grin of delight as he read the letter then

hastily scribbled a reply for Bill to return.

And now, not even ten hours later, Jess, Sally, and Vera, clad in a trio of fresh-from-the-hardware-store overalls, stood together in the mind-boggling immensity of the strange alien hangar, staring up once again at what Jess had discovered behind the iron ship.

“Seven days,” Jess said. “That’s what we got. Granted, it ain’t a lotta time, but the way I see it, we all pull together, we can do this. Not saying it’ll be easy. Ya don’t like axle grease, walk away now. Coal dust? Engine oil? See above. Is it a gamble? Sure. But hey, *this* kinda gamble? It’s the *good* kinda gamble, am I right?”

The exhilaration in Sally and Vera’s eyes was answer enough.

“That’s what I like to hear,” Jess said. “So step up then, ladies. Cos us?” and pocketing the acceptance letter from the man called Murphy, Jess draped her arms around the denim-clad shoulders of her two best friends. “We just got ourselves into the Martian railroad business.”

And they had too. Big time. Because there it was. Stretched out before them like some sleeping giant. Two hundred or more all-steel tons of ten-wheeled, steam-driven, locomotive perfection, its black and gold livery glinting in the bright white light of the otherworldly hangar. Though she might never say so aloud, Jess truly thought that

the metal behemoth in whose shadow they all now stood could well be the single most beautiful thing she had ever seen. A thousand boiler horsepower at the very least, Jess reckoned, each of its six enormous drive wheels taller than Jess herself, each of its powerful pistons poised to thrust those titanic wheels into motion again, so that the whole might once more take to the rails and claim a place among the legions of such machines that continued to build this new hope of a planet.

Among the iron gods of Mars.

END OF SAMPLE

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