

**PRISONERS OF MARS**

**CANNONBALL**  
*EXPRESS*

***KIT KANE***

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# 1

## *When the Bough Breaks*

The old man's eyes had barely begun to recover from the last lightning blast when yet another bolt of retina-scorching blue lanced down through the ceiling. Slamming into the main console, the strike sent a further wave of shattered components arcing across the decimated control room, gray clouds of vaporized steel roiling through the already smoke-filled air. All around, flames leapt higher still, the very walls shaking with the storm's thunderous rage.

The rest of them were dead, the old man told himself. He had to accept it. Everyone else in the control room, gone now. All except him and—

As if anticipating the thought, another sound rose up from behind—a resonant, heart-rending shriek that topped even the relentless crash-and-boom of the storm outside. For now, it was a sound the old man fought to ignore as he battled with the multiple zippers of his emergency jumpsuit, finally pulling the last of the plastic tabs home. With his suit's fastenings secure and his heart hammering, the old man donned the outfit's fishbowl helmet, and a second later, following a twist and a click, the protective headgear locked into place on the jumpsuit's steel collar mounting.

Spinning where he stood, he turned to it at last—to that heart-rending shriek behind him, audible even through the thickness of the helmet—and after stepping over the two charred bodies at his feet (oh god, don't look, just *don't* look), the old man lowered himself into a squat, reaching out with gloved and shaking hands for the source of that desperate, primal howl.

The infant girl lay in the plastic cocoon of her baby-seat, arms and legs thrashing, soot-stained face screwed into a pudgy fist of scarlet fury. That the two blackened shapes beside her were all that remained of her parents—all that remained of the old man's daughter and son-in-law—the little girl could not, of course, know or understand, but on picking the baby up, the old man nonetheless shielded her infant eyes from the terrible sight,

before turning and racing for the door.

Hurling over a nightmare course of wrecked machinery, rising flames, and churning smoke, the old man stumbled to a stop at the control cabin's exit, wrenched it open, and, even as another bolt of lightning came crashing into the room behind him, staggered through the door.

Outside, the storm raged louder still, *wilder* still, and as the old man raced across the steel surface of the platform, screaming baby clutched tight to his chest, lightning pounded down all around. It struck the platform's towering crane gantries, its railtrack sidings, its turntable. All to be expected, of course, and, taken alone, no cause for alarm. *Those* structures were built to withstand it.

But the platform's *outbuildings*? Its *personnel quarters*? Its *control cabin*?

Even as he ran, the old man could see where multiple lightning hits had breached those *other* structures too, turning every one of them into a twisted, smoldering ruin.

And it made no sense. It shouldn't be happening. *Couldn't* be happening. The platform's Lightning Strike Protection system ought to have shielded *all* such areas.

But it hadn't. And now everyone—*almost* everyone—was dead.

Barreling onward, his boots pounding and his

heart thudding, the old man saw the platform's edge loom into view ahead, and even though he knew full well what lay beyond that hard steel terminus, his pace did not falter. Three more strides was all it took, and planting his free hand atop the guardrail that skirted the platform's perimeter, he vaulted the low steel balustrade. Baby howling in his other arm, the old man felt his legs clear the top rail, the rest of his body follow...

... and down they went together, he and his tiny shrieking charge.

Tumbling through the storm clouds, ever more lightning crashing and flashing all around, the old man and baby fell... and fell... and fell... until, almost ten full seconds later, after plunging into a cloud-free zone, the old man braved a glance at what lay beneath...

... and there it was, still fifteen kilometers or more below, the pale red shape of Mars itself, the curve of its horizon shockingly clear from up here in the planet's raging troposphere.

Question after question hurtled through the old man's mind as he fell:

Was it *possible* for him and the baby to survive a jump from this altitude?

Would he manage to stay conscious for the whole of the descent?

Conscious enough to retain a grip on the precious bundle in his arms?

Conscious enough to deploy his chute at the right moment?

Would they even make it through the storm zone before three-hundred-million volts of—

With which half-formed thought the single biggest lightning bolt the old man had ever seen came crashing in. Like the lash of some furious Martian god, it struck him and the baby both—  
—and after that there was only darkness.

## 2

### *Saturday Night at the 'Shoe*

#### **Seventeen Years Later**

“Girl, are you frickin *serious?*” Jess Flint blurted.  
“*Ann Simpson?*”

Opposite Jess, across the corner table they’d secured in the good-natured rumpus that was the Lucky Horseshoe Saloon on a Saturday night, Vera Middleton, Jess’s pale-skinned and oh-so-very-English best-friend-and-business-partner, raised one of her delicate eyebrows the merest half centimeter, before turning to the fella beside her and proceeding to straighten his already laser-straight necktie. The fella in question—another of Jess’s partners in Trans-Mars Haulage and *also* a



Brit, this time of the Cockney variety—was Dave Hart, while the aforementioned tie-straightening turned out to be the sartorial cherry on a Middleton sprucing that, Jess would be forced to admit, had done Mister H no small amount of good in the presentation department. Smart jacket, neatly pressed chinos, shiny new shoes, the fella looked great. Further proof that Vera Middleton could spruce for England, should that discipline ever emerge as an Olympic event.

“Just ignore her, David,” Vera said, her light blue eyes—peering as ever over the tops of gold-rimmed, half-moon spectacles—*daring* Jess to lodge further objections.

It was a dare Jess chose not to take, vaguely aware that her blurted protestation of moments ago had, for reasons obscure, emerged with rather more passion than she’d intended.

“Because let me assure you,” Vera continued to Dave at her side, “Ann Simpson is *lovely*.”

And hey, Jess thought, in the *looks* department at least, there could be no arguing *that* point. Ann was a knockout. One who could run her delicate fingers (not a digit among them work-calloused or oil-stained) through her luxurious fall of gleaming blonde hair (not a lock of it brittle with daily applications of grease-killing, industrial-strength shampoo) and bring pretty much anything in pants a-running. *Lovely? Credit where*

*credit's due, Jessica, dear, so just button thy lip, okay?*

But then, even as Jess turned to take in once more the fine-figured form of the 'lovely' Ms. Simpson—currently entertaining a gaggle of potential suitors at the opposite end of the saloon—those *reasons obscure* seemed to dig again at Jess's gut, and her internal censor finally washed its hands of the matter. *Further objections* there would be:

“Come on, Vera. The gal goes through guys like beer snacks! Is that *really* what we want here? To see our Dave—our own *delightful* Dave—an empty scrunched up pretzel packet, lying discarded on some liquor-stained floor as soon as Ann Simpson spots a bag of nachos with a fancy new flavor?”

“Oh, please!” Vera returned. “Tortured similes aside, a slight exaggeration, don't you think? And anyway, we are only talking *options*, aren't we, David?”

Dave opened his mouth to reply but found himself cut off as Vera whipped out a small pink notepad and turned her attention to a handwritten list on its top page. At the very same moment, from the saloon's tiny stage, Sally Chu—yet another of Jess's best-friend-cum-business-partners, as well as the 'Shoe's resident showgirl most Saturday nights—set to wowing the packed house with a 1920s Betsy Bow classic:

*“Why do I want what I just can't have  
When I finally have what I want?  
I order fish, it looks real great,  
And then I see the beefcake  
On my girlfriend's plate...”*

“By my count,” Vera continued over the music, totting up the list in her notepad, “this dear little town of ours offers, as of even date, a total of *nine* single ladies of appropriate age, all of whom Dave would do well at least to consider. Along with Ann Simpson then, we have Charlene Tate—”

“*Charlene!*?” A dang curious thing, but *blurting* appeared for the moment to have become Jess’s sole mode of communication. “Vera, you *know* how possessive that gal is!”

“Doesn’t get through men like beer snacks though, does she?”

“No, she just takes the snacks home and shoves them in the back of the cupboard with the dried prunes and the tinned anchovies, so that no one—*no one*—ever gets to snack on them again.”

“I really ought to report you for cruelty to similes.”

Dave cleared his throat and raised a finger. “Um, guys, you think maybe I could—”

“Get a round in?” Jess said. “Good plan! Some beer snacks’d be nice too.”

“Buy a drink for Sally as well, would you,

please?” Vera added. “She’ll be finishing up soon. Hang on, I have the full order here,” and tearing a page from her notepad, she handed the small square of paper to Dave, who looked for a moment as if he were about to contribute something further to the proceedings, but then just shut his mouth, expelled a sigh, and turned for the bar.

As she watched him head off, Jess found herself musing—and not for the first time—on how well their temporal stowaway from a twenty-first century Earth continued to cope with the fish-out-of-water trope that fate had dealt him. These days, apart from the occasional arcane reference to such things of mystery as the ‘Marvelous Cinematic Universe’ or the apparently unrecognized genius of some fella called ‘Jack Snyder’, most folks would be hard-pressed to know that Dave had been a resident of Mars (for that matter, of the twenty-sixth *century*) but a few scant months. And as for the way he’d made himself such an indispensable part of Trans-Mars Haulage, not to mention a really good friend, what with that big geeky smile of his, and his even *bigger* heart, and his—

Sensing that her interior monologue had taken an unwelcome turn, Jess corked the stream of consciousness, reassured herself that *none* of it was pertinent to the situation at hand, and hastily

drained the dregs of her cocktail to the inuendo-laced strains of Sally ‘The Rose of Tranquility’ Chu:

*“And the pecan pie I thought worth dying for  
Ain’t the treat I sit here sighing for.  
Why do I want what I just can’t have  
When I finally have what I want?  
It’s so perplexing.  
When I finally have what I want?”*

With which lingering musical query, the bar-bound Dave finally disappeared into the crowd...

... and Vera whirled on Jess, blue eyes flashing behind their half-moon glazing. “Okay, *what* do you think you’re doing?”

“Um... huh?” Jess mustered, by no means the conversational sheriff’s posse she’d have liked to head *this* one off at the pass.

“You *know* what I mean. *Why* are you continually sabotaging Dave’s efforts to find love?”

“*Whaaaat!*” Blurted? You betcha. “Okay, first off: Don’t you mean *your* efforts to find Dave love? And second: Sabotaging? *Seriously?* I was just—”

“—manifesting the signs of low-level jealousy is what you were just.”

“Oh, come *on!* How many times, girl! Dave and I are *just friends*. I have *Declan* now.”

And she did. And Vera *knew* that. So why the

heck couldn't she just *accept* it?

Jess had Declan. Handsome, charming Declan. Leader-slash-poster-boy for Mars's Free Air rebels and potential hero-of-the-masses, should Free Air's titular main goal ever be achieved and the decades-long grip of Mars's corrupt air barons brought to an end. Sure, the fact that Declan remained several hundred kilometers away ninety-nine percent of the time was *something* of an issue. But absolutely worth working around. Because the guy really *was* great, and the times he and Jess *did* manage to spend together? Pretty dang satisfactory, thank you very much. So, yes, Jess had Declan. But was that incontestable fact ever going to be enough to swat the determined bee navigating Vera Middleton's ever-so-British bonnet? Not a chance.

"Exactly!" Vera returned. "You have *Declan*, so you can't have *Dave*. But you don't want anyone *else* to have Dave either because, well, frankly, you rather like the way he fawns over you."

"Vera, that's absurd. *Totally* absurd. And anyway, Dave does *not* fawn over me. He—" Clocking the return of the subject under discussion, Jess zipped it, nodding her thanks to the guy as he set a fresh tray of drinks and beer snacks down onto their table.

"Here we go then, ladies," Dave said. Then, to Jess (*fawning*, goddammit), "Got Franco to add an

extra dash of vanilla, just the way you like it, yeah?”

Jess *felt* Vera’s look of triumph a good four seconds before turning to absorb its full irony-powered blast.

“Um, something up?” Dave asked, the above being an example of subtext detectable from space.

“Oh, no, nothing,” Jess answered, presenting the fella with what had to be the galaxy’s fakest smile. “We were just—”

“Jessica Flint?”

The voice—deep, masculine, and dense with authority—cut off the preceding conversation like a meat cleaver to a haunch of beef, and while Jess, given the awkwardness of those last exchanges with Vera and Dave, did feel a surge of relief at the interruption, said relief vanished when she turned to take in the imposing owner of that meat cleaver tone.

Easily touching six feet six and weighing in at what must surely have been over two-hundred pounds—all of them toned to gym-sculpted perfection, judging by the naked bulging biceps that protruded beneath his short-sleeved shirt—the stranger who towered over their bar table was dressed in a dark, pseudo-military uniform, topped off with jet black aviators and a cap whose embroidered insignia sported the words *Westland*

*Security*. And the bad news didn't end there. In most circumstances, those two embroidered words alone would have been enough to set Jess on edge, Westland being amongst the shadiest of Mars's air barons, as well as the company who supplied Tranquility with its overpriced, often barely breathable air. In the current case however, it was the extravagant selection of top-of-the-line weaponry the stranger came bundled with—high-powered automatic rifle, gleaming serrated combat knife, large caliber handgun in a leather thigh holster—that truly rendered any game of Spot the Black Hat redundant.

“Um, I'm Jess Flint. And *you* would be?”

“Follow me. Now.”

The man turned and marched off, leaving Jess and her friends to their deepening frowns.

“Of the Virginia Follow-Me-Nows?” Jess muttered, scowling deeper still as she, Vera, and Dave watched the stranger barge his way out through the swing doors of the Lucky Horseshoe.

“Something tells me a ‘pretty please’ will not be forthcoming,” Vera said through clenched teeth, and rising as one, the three of them followed the stranger out of the saloon.



### 3

#### *Write-Off*

By the time Jess stepped out through the swing doors of the Lucky Horseshoe, the stranger was already halfway across the unlit strip of dirt that served as Tranquility's main street. The Martian night was a chill one, a light breeze cutting like a knife through Jess's thin blouse, while far above, lightning flickered and thunder rumbled on the other side of a heaving blanket of dark cloud.

With Vera and Dave at her heels, Jess set off after the man in the Westland Security uniform, the granite-faced stranger now drawing hostile looks from a scattering of tipsy punters who lurked on the saloon's ample stoop. And it wasn't just

humankind whose Black Hat sensors were being triggered, it seemed; from somewhere behind the saloon, a small white dog made a sudden surprise appearance, tearing right past Dave—who leapt aside in somewhat exaggerated shock—and racing up to the stranger in black to yap at his pseudo-military bootheels.

*You go, girl*, Jess urged silently, recognizing the animal at once as Bunny Foo Foo, old Mrs. Carter’s spunky little Bichon Frise. *Tell him how ya feel, babe.*

Which, had Jess actually been able to speak Dog, would have turned out to be some seriously questionable advice, because without so much as a cautionary word, the Westland guy stopped in his tracks, drew his handgun, and pointed it straight at the dog’s tiny pom-pom of a head.

Bunny Foo Foo’s furious yappings died at once, replaced by a brief and pathetic doggy whimper as the terrified animal, clearly a creature with previous experience of these things called firearms, turned tail and scurried back into the darkness behind the saloon.

Jess, Vera, and Dave stumbled to a halt behind the Westland Security officer and watched with naked disgust as the man returned his handgun to its thigh holster.

“Oh, please,” the stranger drawled. “So I’m a cat person,” and with that he resumed his march

across Main Street, Jess, Vera, and Dave following as before.

“Word has it you’re the best engineer in this region,” Westland growled as he walked.

“Um... thank you?” Jess muttered, still reeling at what she’d just seen.

“This region is a backwater of lowlives, degenerates, and no-account trailer trash.”

“... Consider that thank-you withdrawn. Look, what is this about? You haven’t even—” but Jess got no further, the rest of her words catching in her throat as, finally, she saw it:

In the rail siding across the other side of Tranquility’s shadow-drenched main drag there stood a train. A modest affair at first glance, the mysterious, unscheduled arrival consisted of a locomotive and only three cars. The loco on its own was nothing to strike a gal speechless—just some kind of short, squat diesel affair. And the first two of those three cars—number one, a crew/maintenance wagon; number two, a basic, no-frills passenger car—were likewise *not* the reason for Jess’s sudden lapse into the non-verbal. No, that honor belonged to wagon number three, a type of railcar Jess knew existed but had never actually seen in real life.

It was a jail wagon.

Solid steel coachwork, barred window casings over what looked like five-centimeter-thick

armored glass, multiple padlocks securing what were almost certain to be doors already double- or even *triple*-bolted, the jail wagon sat there at the end of the short train, a dull, gunmetal gray in the dark of the Martian night, its imposing form surrounded by a contingent of armed guards, each one more grim-faced than the last. To describe the wagon as ‘built like a tank’ would, Jess thought, have been a disservice to the wagon’s makers, who had created a piece of rolling-stock that could surely repel assault by an entire *division* of tanks. Alcatraz on rails more or less summed it up.

Still trailing along after the Westland guy, Jess and her friends drew closer still to the troubling sight in the siding, and as they did so, Jess’s dark-adapting eyes began to discern something else.

Faces.

Faces behind the armored glass of the jail car’s barred windows. There were a dozen of them at least, men and women of various ages, and even in a starless gloom that should have obscured such details, Jess could trace the emotions etched into those shadowy visages: anxiety, anger, dread.

“Um... what is this?” Jess said. “Who are these people?”

The man mountain they followed just kept on walking. “You don’t need to know. Only question here is... can you fix it?” and arriving at last by the train’s diesel locomotive, the Westland guy drew

to a stop, Jess and her friends along with him.

Jess ran her eyes over the loco. “Holy crap! What the hell happened?”

Turning his black-as-night aviators on Jess, Westland allowed a lengthy pause to chill the cool night air another degree or two. “I repeat,” he said at last. “*Can you fix it?*”

Once more, Jess ran a critical eye over the train’s loco. In anyone’s books, the engine before them was a total write-off—a smoking, buckled wreck whose catastrophic condition almost defied logic. How the train had even made it into Tranquility’s siding, Jess struggled to imagine, but no way in hell was the thing rolling out of there again. At least, not under its own power. The locomotive’s driver clearly knew this too. Clad in the traditional striped denim coveralls and cap of a train driver, the guy sat slumped on the top step of the cab’s entrance, a smoldering clay pipe poking from his bushy red beard, his weary eyes barely bothering to acknowledge the group now studying the wrecked remains of his engine.

So... *could* Jess fix this thing?

Her eyes flitted first to the ‘Westland Security’ logo on the stranger’s cap...

... then down the train to the gallery of despairing faces that populated the barred windows of the jail wagon.

At last, she turned back to Westland. “No. I

*can't* fix it. Sorry, bud.”

Was that a disapproving raise of the eyebrows Jess detected behind the fella's idiotic, bad-guy sunglasses? She suspected it was.

“Okay,” the man in black said. “But you can supply a replacement locomotive, yes?”

“Nope.”

And this time there could be no doubt about the guy's displeasure as a pair of distinct creases formed above the rims of his aviators. “You understand that, while you *will* be paid for your services, this is *not*—I repeat, *not*—a ‘request’.”

Jess risked a careless shrug. “Dunno what else to tell you, fella. Your loco's a write-off, and I got nothing suitable to take its place.”

With which flagrant rebuff the Westland guy's right hand dropped again to his thigh holster, his fingers just beginning to close around the handgun there when—

“Yessirree, ya got the measure of that one for sure, officer.”

The voice, all western drawl and fake bonhomie, belonged to James ‘Daddy’ Dodds—owner and operator of Tranquility's other rail haulage company, and, in Jess's not unpopular opinion, one flesh-crawling case study in entitled arrogance. Jess scowled as the fella came strolling toward them from the saloon, brushing down his immaculate white suit as he walked and sucking on

one of those fat cigars that seemed to poke all-but-permanently from his self-important face.

“No friend of honest business is our Ms. Flint,” Dodds continued as he approached. “No friend at all,” with which assertion he came to a stop before Westland and shot a sidelong glance at the wrecked locomotive. “Gal’s right about one thing though. Your loco’s a write-off to all but the Good Lord. And *He* ain’t donning the denims for anything ’cept the Glory Train itself, hallelujah!”

Westland looked the newcomer over. “And you would be?”

“James Dodds, proprietor of Dodds Transport and owner of several of this region’s finest locomotives, one of which I may, upon negotiation, be able to supply to your good selves by six tomorrow morning. Dare I suggest we talk business? I have a private room in the ‘Shoe we could use. And a thirty-year-old bottle of Kentucky’s finest, should that be of interest.”

Jess watched the pair size each other up for a long moment, until finally, without so much as a parting glance at Jess, the Westland guy turned on his heels and began to head back to the saloon. Dodds, needless to say, *did* spare Jess a glance—one of those smug and oily affairs he reserved for hated business rivals—following which, Tranquility’s other rail boss went sidling along after Westland, trailing clouds of blue cigar smoke

in his wake.

As they watched the two men go, Jess and her friends exchanged a series of troubled looks, but it wasn't until she was turning back to survey the train again that, for Jess, it finally clicked. And clicked hard. Hard enough that Vera caught the moment of realization on Jess's face:

“Jess? Jess, what is it?”

Hunched against the cold of the Martian night and chewing anxiously on her lower lip, Jess frowned at her two friends. “I take it neither of you has read the evening paper yet...”



## 4

### *A Midnight Visitor*

Jess slammed the newspaper—a rumpled edition of today’s *Herald*—down onto the battered mahogany desk, smoothed out the worst of the paper’s wrinkles, then took a step back to let the contents of the front page tell their grim story to Sally, Vera, and Dave.

It was just over an hour later, and having taken Jess’s diesel pickup to the Shop—the out-of-town complex that served as Trans-Mars Haulage’s base of operations—the four of them stood now in the TMH office, the Saturday night atmosphere of the Lucky Horseshoe a distant memory. Outside, the dark of the Martian night grew deeper still, and

that heaving blanket of cloud above had begun at last to unload its watery shipment, fat raindrops lashing the office windows and pounding the dirt of the yard beyond, where the Cannonball Express stood majestic in its bay.

Huddled around the desk with Jess, their somber faces lit by the soft glow of a single oil lamp, Sally, Vera, and Dave frowned as they took in the newspaper's bold, 50-point headline:

### RADICALS ARRESTED AT SKYHOOK 3

"I'm telling you, it's them," Jess said, gesturing to the headline text, along with the almost half-page photograph that accompanied it: a stark and dramatic black and white image of the aftermath of an airship crash. The huge craft itself lay crumpled on some barren Martian plain, while fire crews doused its flaming remains with arcing jets of water, and medics ushered stunned survivors toward waiting ambulances. A shocking and newsworthy image for sure, Jess thought.

Vera picked the paper up and began to read aloud from it:

"Westland Security confirmed that it shot down the airship yesterday as the craft attempted to dock at Skyhook 3's sub-orbital base. Arrested parties, all of whom were found to be traveling under false papers, are thought to belong to controversial

pressure group Free Air, and are now on their way by rail to New Detroit, pending an expedited trial later this week.”

“Skyhook 3?” Jess said. “Yesterday? Heading for New Detroit by rail? Gotta be them, right?”

Sally nodded, her pin-up perfect features tight with anger. “Pretty much. Frickin Westland...”

It was a sentiment shared by all present, Jess knew, Westland—or Westland *Air*, to give them their full title—being one of the most corrupt of Mars’s ‘air barons’, the private companies whose vast production plants supplied the red planet with its atmosphere. Much of western Mars, Tranquility included, had Westland to thank for its crippling expensive yet poor quality air, and the resultant hostility that many felt toward the company was only exacerbated by its security forces, notorious throughout the region for their brutal treatment of colonists who failed to pay the exorbitant air taxes Westland charged. As for those who dared cross the company in *other* ways...

“Know what happened the *last* time Westland were taking a train filled with supposedly dangerous Free Air activists to trial?” Jess said.

Sally and Vera knew, of course, but not Dave, who shook his head on cue.

“*Exactly*,” Jess said. “*No one* does. Vanished. Just like that. Officially, Free Zone marauders or some

such.”

“Yeah, right,” Sally growled, her words underscored by a doom-laden rumble of thunder from outside.

Vera let out a sigh and slumped into a nearby chair, anxiety sharpening her normally honeyed English tones: “Oh, golly, this is *awful*. What can we do? There must be *something* we can—”

A loud knock at the door stole away the rest of Vera’s words, and a communal gasp of shock went hissing through the room as all eyes shot to the main exit behind them—the one leading out into TMH’s rain-lashed yard. Frozen rigid where they stood, no one dared reply.

At last, Dave risked a whisper: “Um, we expecting anyone?”

Jess raised a skeptical eyebrow and nodded to the wall clock, now nudging its way past the witching hour. “At this time of night? Not likely. Sal...”

But Sally was already on the case, pulling a pair of gleaming brass knuckle dusters from a pocket, slipping her fingers into them, and lowering her petite but powerful frame into a defensive stance.

At the same time, Dave and Vera glanced about the office, each grabbing the nearest heavy object to hand—Vera a large rock paperweight; Dave an industrial-grade hole-punch, his clenched features suggesting he was fully prepared to puncture any

and all interlopers into holey submission.

Jess and Sal crept up to the doorway, and positioning herself carefully to one side of it so that she wouldn't be seen, Jess peeked through the door's small window. In the rain-washed darkness beyond, she could just make out a lone, shadowy figure, and turning again to Sal, she raised a single finger to communicate this same intel. "Okay," Jess mouthed to her brass-knuckled friend, "on three, yes?"

Fingers flexing in their metal armor, Sally nodded in reply, and after a deep breath, Jess let her own fingers close around the door knob. Bracing herself for whatever might come, Jess mouthed a silent *one-two-three* to Sally and, with a single twist-and-yank, hauled the door open.

At the same time, Sally sprang forward, grabbed the figure outside by the collar, and hauled it bodily into the room. Like the judo ace she was, Sally heaved the shocked individual over one dipped shoulder and sent the man—because a man it clearly was—slamming into the office floor. During his short, arcing journey, a single startled yelp found its way out of the guy's gaping mouth, followed by a pained OOF! as the flat of his back struck floorboards. A heartbeat later, Sal was atop the prone figure, her knuckle-dustered fist drawn back, ready to—

"Sal, wait!" Jess said, and mid-pummel, Sally

paused, the fella pinned beneath her shrinking in fear, his palms raised in submission.

“You,” Jess said to the flinching figure. “You’re the driver. The driver of that prison train.”

And he was, the guy’s cap and striped coveralls a clear marker of his occupation, his bushy red beard unmistakable as the same one Jess had seen furbishing the chin of the jail train’s despondent lone crewman.

“Guilty,” the train driver said. “My name is Riggs. Joseph Riggs, and I—”

“What the *hell*, man?” Jess blurted in fury. “I already *told* you, I do not work for Westland.”

“I know that,” their midnight visitor said, and then added, “Neither do I.”

## 5

### *Prisoners of Mars*

Less than a minute later, the man called Riggs was sitting with Jess and her friends at the lamplit table in the TMH office, apprising them in low and somber tones of his *true* allegiance, as well as of the grim series of events that had led him to their door.

As she listened to Riggs's story, Jess found herself doubting not a word of it. The frank intensity of the man's account simply could not have been faked, she felt, and an occasional glance to Sal and the others revealed *them* to be similarly taken with the engine driver's tale.

"So..." Jess said, "I'm guessing that it was *you*

who sabotaged your own locomotive.”

“It was,” the man replied.

“And that doing it just outside of Tranquility was no coincidence.”

A wry smile accompanied Riggs’s response: “Your Free Air sympathies aren’t exactly a secret, Ms. Flint. Declan sends his best, by the way.”

Seated by Jess’s right shoulder, her angry scowl deeper than ever, Sally continued to scrutinize the crumpled evening edition of the *Tranquility Herald*—its blaring headline (RADICALS ARRESTED AT SKYHOOK 3) as well as the picture of the airship crash printed below. “I still don’t get it,” she said. “I mean, *seriously?* Westland shoot down an *entire airship* just to collar some Free Air activists? Cos let’s be honest here. If they wanted to grab themselves some placard-waving pains-in-the-corporate-ass, they coulda scooped up a pile of ’em at any Free Air demonstration between here and Westland HQ.”

“Oh, these are more than just placard-waving activists,” Riggs replied. “*Much* more.”

Jess and her friends exchanged a series of baffled looks before turning again to Riggs, waiting for the man to continue. When he did, his tone was graver still:

“Basically, we are talking *major* intelligence assets here.”

“*Intelligence* assets?” Dave said. “You mean



they're... what? Undercover agents or something?"

"Several of them have been in deep cover for years. At Westland itself, at various other air companies across Mars, in *government* even."

Sally gave a low whistle. "Wow... and the tales they'd be able to tell, right?"

"Exactly. Their evidence—their *testimony*, should they ever get the chance to deliver it—is pure nitro; potentially, it could blow Mars's whole institutional corruption thing wide open. Bolster demands for an inquiry. Maybe even bring down the air barons themselves."

A thoughtful silence fell in the room, the thunderstorm outside now heading over the western horizon, its last grudging grumbles low and intermittent.

"So what on earth *happened?*" Vera asked.

Riggs sighed and shook his head. "Unfortunately, the actual *source* of the security breach is still a mystery, but the *result* was that a whole bunch of our deepest cover agents had those covers well and truly shredded. By blind luck alone, we got wind of the situation just in time—less than an hour before Westland were due to swoop in and make their coordinated arrests."

"And you pulled your people out," Jess said.

Riggs nodded. "The plan *was* to try and get them to Earth. Get them as far out of Westland's

reach as possible.”

“Yeah,” Sally said. “Problem is, getting your guys and gals off planet *now*? No chance. Not a Skyhook on Mars ain’t controlled by the air barons, and the second we spring your chickens? BAM! Super tightened security at every Skyhook base. Chartering a cruiser to Earth with *that* kind of heat on? Forget it.”

*Forget it* was right, Jess knew, cursing Mars’s chaotic upper atmosphere and the endless challenges it posed—in this case, the rather basic challenge of getting onto or off planet. An unexpected byproduct of centuries of terraforming, the storm-battered and radiation-laced skies of Mars had long prevented actual spacecraft from landing directly on the planet itself, the electronic and computerized control systems of such ships unable to function in the EMP-riddled hell that swathed the red planet for almost twenty kilometers above its surface. In order to solve this thorny problem, a network of geo-stationary satellite spacedocks had been established, each one sporting carbon nanotube tethers over 20,000 kilometers long that dangled planetward, all the way down to corresponding bases attached to the tethers’ lower ends. These lower bases—the ‘hooks’ of the so-called Skyhook systems—were situated not *on* the planet itself but in its upper atmosphere, *above* the EMP zone but

within reach of specially designed airships that ferried passengers and cargo from the actual surface. Long indispensable to the Martian colonies, Skyhooks remained the *only* official way onto or off planet, and unfortunately for Riggs—and as Sally had intimated—air baron majority influence extended well into the governing boards of every single Skyhook company, a circumstance unlikely to change for at least another century, probably more.

Of course, the operative word in all of the above was ‘official’, some rogue part of Jess’s brain appeared keen to point out, the beginnings of an idea—a *sane* idea? Not likely, but an idea all the same—stirring somewhere in the cerebral shadows...

Riggs, however, was in full agreement with Sally re any kind of imminent travel off planet. “You’re right,” he said. “We spring the prisoners, Skyhook security goes through the roof, and we’re pretty much stuck planetside till the heat dies down, which could be months. So, yeah, even if we *do* somehow manage to free our people—and hey, I realize that’s a whole big question on its own—we’d need to move them someplace that Westland can’t get to them. I was thinking maybe New Avalon, yes? Take them there and it would at least give us a bit of breathing space. A chance to—”

“Actually, there might be a way,” Jess said, the

words out of her mouth before she'd even *begun* to think through the practicalities of the outlandish idea now establishing itself with ruthless logic in her brain.

Another silence descended on the room, and all eyes turned to Jess.

"I'm sorry?" Riggs said.

"To get the prisoners off planet," Jess continued, doubtful of every word even as she uttered it but unable to stop herself now that she'd started. "To get the prisoners off planet *without* having to go through Skyhook security. There just *might* be a way..."

## 6

### *Ready to Roll*

Standing atop the tender of the Cannonball Express, the pink-hued advances of a soon-to-be-rising sun tinting the eastern horizon, Jess held the spout of the standpipe steady and let the flow of H<sub>2</sub>O gush into the tender's water compartment. At the same time, on the coaling tower opposite, Sally tipped another full bin of anthracite into the fuel section of the same tender. Both compartments—water and fuel—were close to capacity now, Jess was relieved to see, a more than ample supply for the journey ahead, even if the same couldn't be said for their *dwindling* supply of *time*.

Once Jess had explained her plan to the others (and received, at first, looks of disbelief, followed by ones of reluctant approval), the considerable work that followed—that of prepping and firing the Cannonball for the job to come—had eaten up a full four hours of the new Martian day, leaving them with a distinctly challenging deadline. Truth be told, it would have taken a lot *longer* had the loco not still been warm from its previous day's work, so really, they should count themselves lucky, Jess reckoned. And in the end, with a following wind, they absolutely *could* still *do* this.

Not that *everyone* shared Jess's determined, glass-half-full attitude.

"You realize this is insanity," Sally bellowed from the coaling tower, the gal's words barely audible over the ear-pounding clatter of anthracite tumbling into the tender. "*Total* insanity."

"Not necessarily," Jess yelled back as she shut off the standpipe's flow, the water compartment now at maximum. If she'd expected a vague 'not necessarily' to cut it with Little Miss Glass-Half-Empty though, she was sadly mistaken:

"From what I've heard, the guy's practically certified," Sally bawled, tipping a final binload of anthracite into the tender's fuel section. "Not to mention a virtual recluse," and after wheeling the emptied bin back into its bay, Sally began to descend the coaling tower steps, while Jess set

about clambering down the side ladder of the now fully loaded tender.

“I mean, has anyone even *spoken* to this dude recently?” Sally persisted, she and Jess hopping simultaneously onto the dusty ground of the TMH yard.

“Depends what you mean by *recently*,” Jess hedged, hauling on the standpipe’s chain to swing the spout clear of the Cannonball.

“Last two years?” Sally said, her coal-blackened face appearing at Jess’s shoulder.

“... Not as far as I know.”

“*Seen* him then?”

“Not—”

“—as far as you know. Great. And what if he flat out refuses?”

Struggling (and failing) to rein in a frustrated sigh, Jess scowled back at her ever cynical friend. “He won’t, Sal. He hates the barons—hates *Westland*—more than anyone. Trust me, he’ll help,” with which final word Jess turned on her steel-tipped bootheels and began to head back up the train for the Cannonball, Sally following. A dozen or so paces later, the pair of them came to a stop by the loco’s cab just as Dave and Riggs stepped down from it.

“So how’s she looking?” Jess asked, running her eyes over the towering marvel that was the Cannonball Express, and feeling, as she always

did, that poignant swell of near maternal pride. Even with the murk of the Martian pre-dawn obscuring the dazzle of its red and gold livery, the Cannonball remained a sight to set any engineer's heart a-racing—two-hundred all-steel tons of railroading magnificence, Jess's own super-sleek adaptations to the nineteenth century locomotive lending it a retro-futuristic, art deco cool that was guaranteed to turn heads wherever it went.

"Warwick, he say we ready to roll," Dave piped up, tipping a cheery salute to the even cheerier fella named—the old movie actor Warwick Davis, whose framed photograph (one of Dave's only mementos from his own time on twenty-first century Earth) hung above the loco's throttle as their oddball ersatz Saint Christopher.

"And *Vera*, she concur," came a second voice, that of their own V. Middleton as she appeared in the open rear of the loco's cab, pad and pencil in hand, half-moon spectacles low on her delicate nose. "Even if *some* of us might benefit from reviewing company policy re *proper place* and *everything in*," Vera added, tapping pad with pencil and angling a school ma'am-ish look to Sally.

In response to the above, the accused offered a scowl of surprise, but before Sally could mount a defense, Vera, with a theatrical flourish, tore the top page from her notepad and stuck it above a conspicuously empty storage hook in the cab. The



note read:

PLEASE STOW SHOVEL HERE AFTER USE

Sally rolled her eyes. “Yeah yeah, I was *gonna* put it back,” she drawled, retrieving the absent shovel from the ground nearby and passing it up to Vera, who, with a nod of formal satisfaction, proceeded to hang it in its ‘proper place’.

“Love you, sweetie,” Vera added, by way of the soothing balm.

“Rassnfrassngrrrr you too,” Sally muttered back, prompting Jess to consider briefly the wonders of romance. Because honestly, had anyone else spoken to Sally the way Vera just had, said daredevil-slash-crazy-person would have been hospital bound in seconds flat. Guess that was true love for ya.

It was Riggs who pulled Jess’s focus back onto the rather more pressing business at hand:

“Ms. Flint, you do realize how crazy this all sounds, yes?”

Jess shot Sally a wry look. “Oh, believe me, I feel amply informed on that score,” and rolling up the sleeves of her denim coveralls, she launched into a final recap:

“Okay, here it is, folks, one last time: Sal, Vera, Mr. Riggs, *you* are in the Cannonball. Dodds said he’d deliver his replacement loco for six, which

means it'll be rolling into Tranquility in under an hour. So you *really* need to get going. After you've secured the prisoners, you know where to head, and by the time you arrive *there*, Dave and I will hopefully have fixed us all up with a nice little ride off-planet."

"And if you *haven't*?" Sally put in. "And if *we* somehow end up with a bunch of tetchy blackhats on our tail?"

"Well then... that's why God invented twin-barrel laser cannons, am I right?"

Sally shot an admiring—not to say *loving*—look at the aforementioned cannons mounted atop the loco's cab, just one of several enhancements to the Cannonball that employed extraterrestrial tech from the same alien 'junkyard' wherein they'd first discovered the ancient locomotive.

"*Damn*, but the boss-lady knows how to close a deal," Sally said. "All aboard then!" and tucking her jet black hair into a peaked denim cap, the redoubtable Ms. Chu pulled herself up onto the Cannonball's footplate and into the cab, a determined Riggs scrambling after her.

At the same time, Jess jammed her own cap down onto the unruly mass of tight black curls her African genes had seen fit to bless her with, then turned to the fella destined to be her partner in crime for the evening. "Okay, Dave, with me!" she said, the pair of them hopping into Jess's waiting

four-by-four and slamming its rusting doors.

As Jess cranked the ignition and wrenched the stick, Dave shot her a knowing look from the passenger seat while simultaneously reaching for his seat belt. “So I’m guessing this’ll be one of your ‘buckle up’ type deals, yes?”

Jess smiled. “You know me so well,” and with a screech of tires and a throaty roar from its perfectly tuned engine, the four-by-four took off, throwing up clouds of red Martian dust as it hurtled away into the diminishing dark of the early morning.

## 7

### *Beckham's Folly*

“Here, put this on, babe,” Sally said, plucking a soot-stained fireman’s cap from a corner compartment in the Cannonball’s cab and handing it to Vera beside her. “If that dude in the bad guy shades recognizes you, this whole nutzoid excuse for a plan goes bosoms skyward.”

It was just twenty minutes later, and with the Cannonball now steaming its way carefully into Tranquility’s multi-siding spur, Sally could clearly make out the ‘dude’ in question, hanging with his tooled-up blackhat buddies outside the Lucky Horseshoe, the saloon still miraculously doing a trickle of business, despite a first sliver of Sunday

morning sun creeping its way above the horizon.

“His name is Bates,” Riggs said, easing off on the throttle as the Cannonball edged its way closer, “and yeah, keep your heads down. Guy’s a piece of work.”

“Well, he’s a piece of *something*, that’s for sure,” Vera muttered, the remark as close as Sally had ever heard her girlfriend come to actual swearing. “*Cat person* indeed,” Vera went on, donning the cap Sally offered and pulling its peak down low to keep her face in shadow. “I mean, *seriously*, what kind of a person points a gun at Bunny Foo Foo?”

Sally grimaced. “The kind whose manhood I will happily remove and present to your righteously furious self on a silver platter, my sweet.”

“Yes, well... not sure exactly what I’d *do* with some chap’s detached manhood...”

“Draft excluder for a teeny tiny door, maybe?”

“Stay low, folks,” Riggs said, applying the Cannonball’s brake and bringing loco and tender to a stop beside the Westland train in the parallel siding. The jail transport’s wrecked diesel was gone now, Sally noted, only the crew car, the passenger car, and the jail wagon remaining. A handful of anxious faces peered from the barred windows of the mobile prison, while a brace of stony-faced guards stood poised by its padlocked doors, assault rifles clutched to Kevlar-protected

chests.

With a last cautionary look to Sally and Vera, both of them now huddled together in the farthest corner of the cab, Riggs jumped down from the Cannonball and turned for the saloon. Peering through the cab's open back, Sally watched the engine driver approach the unfeasibly massive figure of the man called Bates.

"I see they towed the write-off okay then?" Riggs said, shooting a glance at the jail train.

"'Bout twenty minutes ago," Bates replied as he sidled over from the saloon, the makings of a frown evident on his brow. "Weren't expecting *you* for another half hour though," he added, glancing at his wristwatch. "Crew on the switcher said six at the earliest for the replacement."

"Yeah, I heard that too, so I thought I'd go apply boot to backside, know what I'm saying?"

From her dark corner in the loco's cab, Sally watched Bates run his aviator-shaded eyes over the Cannonball, the twin black lenses communicating nothing but their trademark *hey, look at me, I'm sooooo badass*. "That's some fancy rig they gave us," Bates said, his frown deepening.

"It is that," Riggs replied. "Nothing I can't handle though. The Dodds fella supplied a couple of crew too," with which Riggs jammed a thumb over his shoulder at Sally and Vera, still crouched together in the shadows of the Cannonball's cab,

their peaked caps pulled down low.

Bates didn't answer right away, and for one queasy moment Sally thought that bosoms had already begun their figurative journey north. But then, at last, the blackhat gave a curt nod. "Go do your thing," he said. "Sooner we're outta this dump the better."



Hurling along the rough dirt tracks that passed for roads on rural Mars, Jess's four-by-four rattled and lurched and bounced its way west, swerving around the not-so-highway's larger rocky obstructions, powering straight over its smaller ones, and taking to the air on more than one occasion when it encountered unexpected humps and rises.

In the driver's seat, undeterred by road conditions (or indeed the frequent absence of any discernible road whatsoever), Jess kept pedal to metal, determined to reach their destination before full sun up, whatever it took out of her trusty pickup.

Across from Jess in the passenger seat, Dave sat wide-eyed and clutching seat leather. "So, um, gonna be much farther then?" he bellowed over the roar of the engine. "Cos seriously, the mind is willing but the arse prays for better upholstery, know what I'm saying?"

“Just a few seconds more,” Jess yelled back, wrenching the steering wheel and skidding her way around a rock the size of a dump truck. “Believe me though, it’s gonna be worth it. Think you’ll like this,” whereupon, with near perfect timing, the speeding four-by-four rounded another bend, crested a low rise... and there it was in a valley below.

Conscious that her previous brief descriptions of it would have done little to prepare Dave for the eye-popping actuality of their destination, Jess had been looking forward to the fella’s response.

And the fella did not disappoint. “Oh...” he said, that one modest exclamation, barely heard over the pickup’s engine, packing an entire world of awestruck. “Oh *wow...*”

Which summed it up rather nicely, Jess reckoned. Because when it came right down to it, the edifice known across the red planet as *Beckham’s Folly* remained, in Jess’s opinion, *the* most awe-inspiring man-made structure on the whole of Mars.

The towering space elevator stood in the valley below, a monument not to ‘folly’ at all, Jess always thought, but to imagination unparalleled and to—*literally*—sky-high ambition. Clustered at the base of the gigantic structure was what looked like an entire small town of support buildings and worker accommodations, while the space elevator



itself—a vast square platform suspended by its corners between four carbon nanotube tether cables that stretched skyward for surely a kilometer before vanishing into the clouds—never failed to boggle Jess’s mind with its combination of breathtaking scale and engineering simplicity.

As for the virgin boggler by her right shoulder, *he*, as Jess had foreseen, appeared to share Jess’s views wholeheartedly, continuing at his loss for words bar two:

“Oh *wow*,” he said again, saucer-wide eyes following the four tether cables up into the cloud-mantled, early morning sky. “Oh, wow wow wow wow *wow*...”

Jess just smiled, steering the four-by-four downhill for Beckham’s Folly while her slack-jawed co-pilot embraced his nerdy monosyllabic ecstasy.

## 8

### *Clank, Clang, Rumble*

Easing off on the Cannonball's throttle, Sally let the locomotive coast backward the last few centimeters till it came to a full stop, a concurrent CLANK indicating that the rear coupling on the loco's tender had connected with the forward coupling on the Westland train to their rear.

They'd have to work fast now, Sally knew. *Real* fast. Though neither she nor Vera could see him from their positions in the Cannonball's cab, Riggs would already be rattling through a standard pre-departure routine—securing the coupling, attaching voice tube connectors, auxiliary oxygen feeds—a routine that would take him no more

than two minutes. Which gave Sally and Vera barely enough time to work *their* way through the Cannonball's lengthy start-up sequence, in preparation for what would almost certainly need to be one *super* rapid departure...

Meanwhile, not twenty meters away, visible through the cab's side window, the man called Bates stood overseeing all in the growing light of the morning. Relieved to note that the blackhat's attention was focused on the *middle* of the train where Riggs worked, and not on the *loco*, in the shadows of whose cab she and Vera continued to lurk, Sally allowed herself to relax just a little—

—which, of course, was the exact moment Bates's aviators swung in the Cannonball's direction.

“Let me know when we're ready to go,” the man called over to the occupants of the locomotive.

Sally shot Vera a dark look, unsure, as Vera clearly was too, whether or not they should respond. In the end, the moment passed, Bates simply turning in place and heading back to the saloon.

Once again, Sally let herself relax a notch—

—and once again caught her breath as Bates stopped abruptly, mid-stride...

... then turned to glance behind him at the Cannonball.

A deep frown—of *suspicion*, Sally had no doubt—creased Bates’s brow, and a moment later the guy began to walk back toward the train, this time making directly for the loco.

Cursing silently, Sally tipped Vera a nod to indicate that Plan B was now on official standby. Said plan was, it had to be said, somewhat on the sketchy side—minimum subtlety, maximum ass-kicking—but hey, at least it *was* a plan. And one to be employed *only* if worse came to worst.

Worse *came* to worst and then kept on coming.

Arriving at the foot of the access ladder that led into the cab, Bates scaled the half dozen steel rungs, hauled his formidable bulk up onto the footplate—

—and came face to face with Sally as she positioned her own considerably *less* formidable bulk in a way that would screen Vera from view. A prudent first move, Sally thought, given that, if Bates were to recognize Vera from earlier, fan and feces would surely go on to do their age-old thang.

Not to say, of course, that the blackhat’s suspicions wouldn’t be similarly raised if he were to recognize Sally as the singer from the saloon.

“Hey, aren’t you the singer from the saloon?”

“What? ... I... um... what? ... I... no... that was...”

Ah hell, minimum S maximum A it was, and grabbing the guy by his shirt front, Sally dragged

Bates into the cab—

—where, before the guy could cry foul, something hefty came arcing down through the shadows to meet Bates's head with a resounding CLANG. Sally winced despite herself and prayed that the blow would be enough. She needn't have worried; in the brief altercation that was Blackhat Skull vs Fireman's Shovel, there could be only one winner, and the man called Bates slumped to the floor of the cab in a ragdoll heap, a scowling Vera looming over him, shovel still in hand.

"Bunny Foo Foo says hello," Vera hissed at Bates's slumped form, "you supposed *cat* person you."

"Yeah yeah, we can workshop the pithy one-liners another time, sweetie," Sally said. "Nice shovel-work though. Now we just have to—"

"Hey, everything okay in there, sir?"

The voice—one of the other guards—came from the direction of the Lucky Horseshoe, where a cluster of blackhats remained gathered by the saloon's swing doors.

"*Damn*," Sally muttered, heaving the unconscious Bates to a cab window, sticking his limp left arm out of it, and adopting her best gravelly bad guy drawl. "All good," she called back, waving Bates's arm through the window then pulling it inside again. "As you were, men."

Sadly, bad guy impressions and improvisational

puppetry proved to be Sally's showbiz Waterloo, the guards by the saloon exchanging puzzled looks and going on to mutter together in a dark huddle.

*Dammit, where the hell is Riggs?* Sally thought. The man must surely have completed his pre-departure routine by now. With which very thought, the fella in question hoisted himself up into the Cannonball's cab, where he started in shock at the sight of Bates, unconscious on the footplate.

"Hoo boy, *that's* not good," Riggs said, before looking up again at Sally and Vera, poised by the Cannonball's rack of controls. "So, um, you said this thing gets off the blocks fast?"

Sally grinned. "Dude, you have *no* idea. Hang on..." and with the bulk of the Cannonball's start-up sequence now behind her, Sally rammed home the final three levers, grabbed the throttle, and nodded across to Vera, who, with a wicked grin of her own, jammed a clenched fist into a big green button on the locomotive's glowing, alien-tech control panel.

In the near silence of those wee small hours, the sudden blast of steam from the loco's pistons was ear-shattering, while the lurching start that followed—light years beyond what any ordinary locomotive could hope to achieve—sent a stunned Riggs staggering backward. Vera barely managed to grab the guy before he tumbled out the cab's

open rear, hauling him back inside even as the Cannonball's shocking burst of alien-tech-enhanced power sent it and its newly attached load accelerating down the tracks of Tranquility's siding and heading for the main line.

Over the ongoing hiss of steam, and the pounding rumble-and-clank of the engine, Sally caught the sound of voices behind them—

“Hey!”

“What the hell!”

“Sir!”

—and as the train continued to pull away, several of the guards by the saloon began to give chase. On foot, sure, but even with its alien-tech-enhanced acceleration, Sally knew that it would be several seconds yet before the Cannonball was outpacing blackhats at full sprint.

A heartbeat later, her fears were realized as the nearest of the guards leapt for the access ladder on the rear of the loco and hauled himself up onto the footplate—

—where he too came face to scoop with the sturdy shovel of Vera Middleton. A second reverberating CLANG! rang through the cab as the unfortunate guard staggered backward and fell to the gravel trackside, rolling along next to the train for several meters in a cloud of dust.

“Babe,” Sally said, “I believe you may just have found your signature weapon.”

Vera's already wide eyes widened still more. "I have a signature weapon? Golly! I—"

She got no further, choked off mid-sentence as a brawny arm whipped around her neck. Bates, visibly bleary but conscious once more, free hand groping for the gun strapped to his thigh.

Still working the Cannonball's throttle, Sally drove a foot backward into Bates's left kidney, and the man crumpled for a second time, a further whack from Vera's shovel sending him tumbling from the rear of the cab—

—where his massive bulk went on to take out three more guards like so many bowling pins—

—before slamming hard into the Martian dirt in another billowing eruption of dust.

Surely that was it, Sally thought. Surely these idiots would give up the chase now. But no. No sooner had Bates rolled to a stop behind them than he rose to his feet and took off again at a run, drawing his handgun as he did so. Several shots rang out, ricocheting off the loco's heavy steel plate, and both Sally and Vera dropped low, taking cover as best they could.

By now though, the Cannonball had to be touching thirty kilometers an hour; no way was the guy gonna catch them. And sure enough, just a few seconds later, the man called Bates, while continuing to give chase at a demon sprint, vanished into the train's dusty wake.



“Ha!” Sally barked in triumph, turning to Vera to see the English gal, smug as a prom queen, hang her ‘signature weapon’ below the little pink notelet that read PLEASE STOW SHOVEL HERE AFTER USE.

“High-five, you Goddess of the Scoop!” Sally yelled over the engine noise. “We lost him!”

Fewer than two more hours would pass before Sally learned just how wrong she was.

END OF SAMPLE

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