

# **The Wizard of Mars**

## **By Jack Wear**

### **Chapter One**

Elli Moore stared at the city beyond her. Tall gleaming structures clustered in the downtown core with green rectangular park areas beyond it. Her hotel room window offered the view in silence with the sealed glass, not allowing any sounds to enter. She sighed, trying to capture one of her last views of Earth before leaving for Mars tomorrow.

Eli didn't want to leave Earth but had run out of options. She had lived the good life, partied too much and was now seriously in debt. When she was fined for damaging property during another one of her intoxicated states, she turned to her parents for help to avoid being placed in a detention centre. Her last stay at the Arizona Detention and Behavior Correction Center was not a pleasant one.

A few months ago she approached her parents for money, expecting a shouting lecture from her mother while her dad would look intently on, disapproval in his eyes. At the end, she expected her dad to say something like, "Princess, we will help you again but you have to change your ways." Her father, hard-working but with a soft spot for his only daughter, protected her from what her mother wanted to do with her. Until this time.

Her mother was silent as Elli made her request and her dad spoke in a firm voice, a voice normally only her brothers heard. "Enough is enough. We will take care of your financial issues on one condition. You are educated and trained as a biologist. Skills you have never put to use since you left university two years ago. As a condition for our help, you will accept a position I have secured for you at BioGeo."

"BioGeo?" The name sounded familiar, but she had stopped investigating potential employers in her field of work, preferring jobs that didn't require much effort to do and easy to pick up after being let go from the last one job.

"One of my associates is on the board of directors has found an opening for you."

"Oh, that's nice." Elli figured she could work there a few months. The money would be good but she didn't like jobs that required her to show up every day for work. Eventually she would want to take a few unscheduled

vacation days and that would mean the end of that employment. However

until then her parents would believe she had decided to act responsible. Losing another job would be unfortunate and she was pleased to do work as a biologist, but later she would end up partying too long and miss too many work days.

“The position pays very well but you have to sign a contract to work for them not less than two years. There are substantial penalties for not fulfilling work related obligations.”

Elli looked shocked, sitting up in the soft fabric chair. “I don’t understand. Is this some sort of government job?” She hadn’t heard of friends having to sign a long term employment contract before. Well, there was Miles Stewart who worked his way to be a starship officer, but no one else she hung around with took work seriously.

“Well, there’s a lot of government money where you will be working.” He paused for emphasis. “Red City.”

Elli gasped. “Red City? That’s Mars! No, please, don’t send me there. I’ll never survive there.”

Her dad shook his head. “Princess, you’re not surviving here. Mars is your best hope to turn your life around. It’s Mars or the detention centre.”

Elli shook her head. “I don’t want to go.” She almost stood up, ready to stomp out of her parent’s mansion. But in her mind a question came to her. *Then what? The detention centre and when you’re out in six months, you’re still in debt and no place to go.* She looked at her dad, at the face that clearly loved her more than she deserved, and lowered her head in defeat.

During her last month on Earth, Elli talked to people like it was the last time she would ever see them. She took pictures of people, animals, buildings and anything that caught her attention. She gave away most of her possessions, knowing how little she was allowed to take to Mars. For the first time in years she visited her parents without wanting something from them. The last weeks passed by too fast and as she sat in her favourite bar on the final weekend, she reflected how odd it all seemed to her. The extra drinks consumed were contributing to the haze in her mind, but she thought the bar and its patrons all seemed surreal. Then it came to her. The bar was like this last week and the week before. Next week would be the same. The one place in which she spent most of her time would be the same without her. Her contribution, other than financial, was none. In her twenty-eight years of existence, her impact in the world was nil. *If I was to die tomorrow how many people would notice or even care?*

Her thoughts were interrupted by her sometimes bed partner, Steve. Big, blond Steve put his arm around her shoulders and placed a shooter down in front of her.

“Here you go, Babe. This is your party tonight. Gotta keep drinking.”

She gave him a smile and hesitated as she took the drink, her thoughts far away.

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Elli dressed casually in cotton slacks and a powder blue T-shirt with a rock groups signature picture of a naked woman sitting on a spaceship emblazoned on the back in gold paint. She punched the elevator button, wondering what could take a full day to orientate those going to Mars the first time.

She exited on the third floor and found the sign indicating she had to go to the Marlborough Room. As she entered the room she saw the people inside and it occurred to her she was underdressed. It was too late to go back and change. *Damn, what was I thinking putting this shirt on? Everyone here are professionals just offered a big opportunity to go to Mars. Maybe I can hide at the back of the room.*

Elli looked cautiously into the room. The ballroom had round tables, each with white starched tablecloths with eight chairs around it. On the tables were name cards for each of the guests. She carefully moved between the tables, looking for her name card. Some men in suits smiled at her while some women raised their eyebrows at her. She felt warm and she knew her cheeks must have be red as she found her name, near the podium. *This feels like the dream where I find myself naked in a crowded room.*

An older woman in a long skirt that matched the vest she wore over her blouse stopped by her table and sat next to her. She gave her a smile. “Relax dear. You weren’t hired for the clothes you wear. If wearing a Quantum Stars T-shirt to a business meeting is the worst thing to happen to you today, then you’re better off than ninety per-cent of the people in the world. That’s what I always tell myself when I do something I regret. Welcome to Ann Soljan’s *I wish I had done that instead Club* ” She stood and went up to the podium where she began to check various devices hidden from view.

Soon the room filled with seated guests and other members at her table all exchanged hellos and smiles. Elli managed to return the smiles and decided Ann was right. She wasn’t going to let this one mistake throw her off all day long.

Ann gave a broad smile and introduced herself as the head of personnel for BioGeo. “The first thing you must know is how we get you to Mars. The lift off from Earth is the standard REV liftoff using the Wardair Spacebus 100.”

There were a few nods of approval. Elli knew the Wardair fleet had a reputation for being the most comfortable and largest available. The REV liftoff stood for Rail Escape Velocity, a method of accelerating a spacebus on a monorail to a high velocity along a vertical slope. She knew

passengers preferred it to the old method of self-propulsion from the ground. REV was quieter and gave a smoother, constant acceleration.

“From the spacebus, you will be transferred to the Kumeu Starship. Due to the limited size of starships you will not be allowed to carry on board anything other than yourself plus the standard suitcase and carry-on bag we provide. You will note the suitcase and carry-on bag are straight forward metal boxes. We use these so they will pack properly in the storage areas of the ship. When you arrive on Mars, there are shops that can sell almost anything you can buy on Earth, so don’t be concerned about what you need to leave behind.”

A woman sitting next to Elli whispered, “I’m leaving my husband behind and have no intention of putting him in a suitcase. On the other hand, maybe I can buy a new one on Mars.”

Elli stifled a giggle. “I hear there’s a good ratio of men to women on Mars.”

“Yeah, if you like brainy, totally focused on work, men.”

“Then I hope there’s a good bar there.”

The woman gave her a smile. “I think we’re going to get along just fine.”

Ann continued with her talk. “Now as for accommodation, and this pertains to the majority of you that will be living in Red City. Each single person is given a well-appointed apartment. The rooms are not large, as space is still a premium on Mars, but you will have privacy if you need it. You can wear what you want when off duty, but during work, you must wear the company uniform. This is done to help protect you from the environment but also to help identify you as BioGeo employees. With thousands of workers on various projects sometimes, you need to know who your co-workers are in a glance. After a short recess we will talk about working outside on Mars.”

Elli got up and walked with the woman who had whispered to her. Jill was thin, an average height blonde that looked tired from too much stress. “What’s your field? I’m deep drill supervisor.”

“Biology. What is deep drill?”

“We need to study core samples and I help supervise the drill that can go several kilometres below the surface.”

“Hey, I might see some of your work. We get slices of core samples to look for signs of ancient life. Most of the simpler life forms are the same as on Earth. It looks like meteorites transferred life between the two planets during their early stages. The more complex life forms are different though. ,”

“Really? How complex were the life forms on Mars?”

“No one is sure yet as they haven’t been able to check much of the

planet. The biggest fossil they found so far was about half a centimetre in length. It might have looked like a shrimp or other water creature. What every biologist is hoping to find is the remains of a land living creature at least the size of your thumb.”

“Well, I’ll keep you informed if any core samples I pull up look like they have a piece of skeleton inside.”

Elli laughed as they walked back to the table carrying a cup of coffee each. “That would be something.”

When the meeting resumed, Ann introduced Dean Edwards, a fifty something man who appeared to have been a body builder at one time in his life. Elli thought he was rather good looking despite being older and, as Jill indicated, probably a nerd.

“The transformation of Mars into a liveable planet again is progressing. I won’t go into too much detail, but to make Mars livable for human life we need to make it warmer, with more water and higher oxygen. The ignition of nuclear fusion deep in the core of Mars a few decades ago is paying off faster than we anticipated. Mars now has a weak magnetic field, and is providing protection against the Sun’s radiation. The warmth radiating from the interior has freed some gases locked inside the ground and that has increased the atmosphere pressure. In addition, water vapour has increased, and the frozen water below the surface has nearly reached liquid form. This is all good news. All of these elements work with each other. Higher atmosphere pressure helps trap in the sunlight, which warms up Mars, which produces more gases and water vapour and starts the cycle over again. Today, Mars has an atmosphere that is almost forty percent of that of Earth’s. The temperature at Red City during the summer averages above the freezing point and can actually be muddy in some areas.”

Dean Edwards stopped and look at the audience, looking quite proud. “So for those working on Mars inside Red City, there are several things you need to be aware of. The buildings are pressurized slightly and have a higher rate of oxygen than the outside. They are also heated to nineteen degrees Celsius. When you go outside, you need to wear a thermal suit. The suits can keep you warm enough except maybe during the coldest days on Mars. You will also need to have an oxygen tank to supplement the low oxygen in the atmosphere. Finally, you will always need to carry a water bottle. Mars is still very dry compared to Earth and you will need to constantly rehydrate yourself.”

Elli listened and heard similar information before how dry and cold Mars was. She heard that one of the most important things to have on hand was skin cream, otherwise you could look old on Mars in a very short time. At the lunch break, she took a sandwich and a cup of soup and joined Jill at their table.

“So Elli, do you have anyone special?”

She shook her head. “No one. I guess I haven’t done too well in the boyfriend department. Actually, I haven’t done well in the friend department, period.”

Jill smiled. “A pretty girl like you? I thought you would have lots of boyfriends and you seem friendly enough to cultivate friends.”

“I spent too much time partying and had a different set of friends every weekend. Looking back, I think that was the wrong approach to life.”

“Perhaps. But why did you do that? What were you looking for?”

“When I was young my parents moved around a lot, so I never thought of friends as long term. I later resented my parents always changing locations, and I ended up being a real brat. I was hard to get along with and didn’t care if I lost friends along the way. I kind of self destructed.”

“That’s very sad. Weren’t you ever happy?”

Elli smiled and closed her eyes. “I remember when I was young, maybe ten, and we were living in Northern Alberta. Right around Christmas, I was playing outside with my friends when it started to snow with these big, heavy flakes. We made snowballs, rolled around in the snow and had so much fun. I will remember that day forever. A week later, we moved far away. I never saw those friends ever again and never again had snow at Christmas.”

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Two days later, Elli stood waiting in line at the spaceport. The line progressed forward slowly until she stood in front of spacebus door. Elli took a deep breath and entered the spacebus. She watched as her carry-on bag was stowed in the compartment above her head by the uniformed personnel and locked into place. She took her seat and tried to peer past the man next to her to see outside. She was happy her parents came to see her off and was surprised her two brothers made the journey as well. For the first time in years, she felt wanted by her family. *I guess it takes the prospect of me going away for two years for them to show they care.* But even as the thought finished in her head she knew that wasn’t fair. It was her that had left the family, doing what she knew would upset them. *I guess I really was a brat. I wish I could live the last few years of my life over.*

The spacebus accelerated along the rail. At first there was a gentle rocking but as the humming noise increased, the spacebus straighten out. In a few minutes, it was streaking down the rail and began the steady rise above the ground. Near the end of the journey, the rail turned upward to an angle of fifty-three degrees, launching the spacebus into the sky. The sound of the engines intensified and Elli leaned back in her seat. There was little to see out of the window and she concentrated on the video of a show in

front of her. She didn't mind flying but disliked the constant push of acceleration in her seat. Half an hour later the engines went quiet and the acceleration stopped.

Elli felt lighter in her seat. The only gravity was the artificial field produced by the spacebus using inertial field. It wasn't full Earth normal. That required more power than was practical for a small ship, but it did prevent passengers from having a queasy stomach and headaches.

Three hours later the spacebus reached the waiting starship. The Kumeu was shaped like a white giant torpedo. Rows of windows covered the top half of the ship while the bottom showed the outlines of various doors used to accept supplies.

Elli boarded the starship, following the other passengers through the docking station. As she left the spacebus and entered the Kumeu, she noticed the increase of gravity to Earth normal. Her legs adjusted after a moment and she continued her journey. One of the ship's crew placed a hand under her arm as she made the transition, making sure she didn't stumble.

"Welcome aboard the Starship Kumeu. We hope you will have a pleasant trip to Mars."

She thanked him, looking up at the tall, young officer. He responded by giving her a warm smile and she wondered what the rules were about crew and passengers mingling.

"Thanks. See you later?" It was forward enough that he should pick up the hint but not too obvious if others overheard.

She followed the cues on the walls and elevators to find her room. It was located near the centre of the ship on one of the middle floors. She guessed it was only a basic cabin, but she didn't intend to waste much time in isolation. The cabin held a bed, normal in length but narrower. A combination desk, entertainment, computer and cabinet sat in one corner. A single chair provided the remaining furniture. One wall had a large viewscreen, currently showing a real time view of Earth. She knew it could be changed to show a variety of scenes, to watch videos or to act as a mirror for dressing. On the opposite wall, a door led to a shared washroom with a neighbouring cabin.

Elli dropped her carry-on bag on the bed checked her appearance and marched out of the room in search of the ship's entertainment facilities.

The Kumeu, like most starships, put a premium on storage space for freight. Passengers were afforded only small quarters but were given an illusion of extra space by arranging the entertainment areas efficiently. Most of the lounges and restaurants were L shaped with mirrors and viewscreens showing false images. The walls had displays that would turn to show different items. There were also exercise rooms, salons, live entertainment rooms. The live entertainment usually consisted of a single

performer in front of a holographic band.

Elli strolled around the concourse, memorizing what each of the four levels had to offer, before returning to the highest level. She walked into the Golden Sun Lounge and sat at the bar, a semi-transparent green plastic counter that looked like floating seashells inside it. She ordered a drink from the overweight, young bartender. He tried to engage her in a conversation, admiring her form-fitting blue shirt and short skirt. Her outfit was meant to attract others, but he wasn't what she was looking for. After a short conversation, she swiveled her chair around.

There were only four men and two women in the bar, which didn't surprise her. Not everyone headed to the bar as soon as they boarded a starship, but she had hoped for more interesting patrons. The men looked a bit too old, serious and likely married. *Young, fun, single guys please. Or any two of those three qualifications.*

Elli finished her drink and exited the bar. Now what bar would a guy go to? She pursed her lips as she checked the ship's directory and made a decision based on the name of the lounge.

She entered Elvira's, trying to look casual as she glanced around. The bar was already half filled with music blaring. Elli made her way between tables, ignoring a deep male voice offering her a place to sit down. She glanced behind her, checking out the table where the invitation came from. The four men looked like workers with thick arms and weathered faces. She frowned when she noticed three of them were wearing identical T-shirts with a company logo emblazoned on the sleeve.

The bar featured two topless dancers on either side of the room on a raised platform. Elli watched them for a moment, and guessed they were holograms on the assumption real dancers would be too expensive. She made her way to a vacant table, sitting so she could observe the bar. A waitress wearing a glittering bikini top and tight shorts took her drink order and sauntered away.

*I've been in worse bars. This is practically home to me.*

"Excuse me, mind if I talk to you for a minute?"

She looked up at the big, older man. "What do you want?" *Might as well cut to the chase and tell him no. There's a ring on his finger and I'm not desperate yet.*

He pulled out a bar stool, sat and gave her a smile. "Don't worry, I'm not trying to pick you up. I hope you don't mind if I give you a bit of advice, and then I'll scram."

"Sure." She returned his smile. He didn't look dangerous, other than being big, and looked friendly.

"You look like a newbie, that you've never been to Mars before."

“That’s true.” She shrugged. “But I’ve been in lots of bars before.”

He grinned. “Well, I tell ya, I have a daughter about your age. If she went to this bar, I sure as hell hope someone would tell her what I’m about to tell you. This ain’t no place for a lady. The guys here are all hard working, hard-drinking men. When they see a pretty thing like you, they’re like wolves. Almost any woman you see here are in the business, if you know what I mean. By the way my, name is Hank Silvers.”

“Elli.” She looked around. There were a lot of hungry eyes staring at her, not blinking when she looked back.

A tall, dark skinned man made his way to their table. “Hey Missy. Why don’t you come and join us for a drink and maybe some dancing?”

Hank tapped the table with the palm of his hand, getting the stranger’s attention.

“What’s your name?”

“Jerome.” He looked at Hank suspiciously.

“Well, Jerome, this here is my niece and her daddy told me to make sure she didn’t go and do anything foolish. That would include getting out of my sight.” He crossed his arms.

Jerome looked back at Elli who was ignoring him. “Hey, no problem. Just being friendly.”

As Jerome walked away Elli looked at Hank. “Thanks, Uncle Hank.”

He chuckled. “Come on. I’m going to go to the casino but I can show you a decent bar where you’re not somebody’s one nighter.”

Elli finished her drink and allowed Hank to escort her out of the bar. “So what do you do on Mars, Hank?”

“I’m a water guy. We have to map out the frozen lakes and oceans below the surface. When, and if, this rusted planet starts to warm up, we better know where there’s solid ground and where something’s wet or someone could sink into mud.”

“Is there a lot of water on Mars?”

“Yeah, about the same ratio of water to land as on Earth except it’s all hidden. How about you, Elli? Medical? Geology?”

“Biology. I’m going to try to find some remains of creatures that used to swim in those oceans.”

He laughed a deep har-har. “Well, if I find any radar images of a whale I’ll give you a call.”

He took her down one level and pointed at a lounge. “Rudy’s is an alright place for you to go. Just remember that eventually you meet everyone on this ship more than once and likely again on Mars. So don’t do anything with anyone you might regret down the road ‘cause you’re bound to run into them again.”

“Thanks, Hank. See you around.” She gave him a smile before heading

to the bar. *Nice guy. He was right about that last bar. Those guys looked too rough.*

Rudy's was busier than the last bar but quieter. The music volume was lower, and the patrons weren't trying to shout to make themselves heard. Elli walked around the bar holding a drink in her hand, weaving around people and tables. She exchanged a few smiles with men and considered a few of them would be interesting to talk to. She was considering her options when she heard her name called out. She turned and saw Jill giving her a small wave from where she was sitting at a small table. Elli gave her a grin and walked over to her.

"Jill, what are you doing here?"

"Trying to relax a bit and see if I know anyone here. I spotted a couple of people I knew on my last assignment to Mars. How about you?"

Elli sat and looked around the bar. "I just thought I'd check out the social life here."

"Well I'm sure you're attracting some attention with what you're wearing. You better be careful you don't get more than you can handle."

"I can handle men." Elli smiled.

"A girl like you should be selective on who gets your company." Jill gave her a wink. "It's more fun making them work for your attention."

"Hi ladies, can I buy you drink?" A male voice, smooth and deep announced his presence.

Elli looked up at the medium height, slightly underweight male. He was approaching middle age but looked to be in good shape. She looked at Jill who gave a small, almost imperceptible shake of her head.

"My name is Glenn, by the way. Two n's." He gave a smile like he was revealing an inside joke.

Elli returned his smile. "Maybe later, Glenn, with two n's. We just want to sit alone for a while, okay?"

"Sure." He put his hand on the back of an empty chair. "What are you ladies talking about?"

"How some men don't pick up hints and ruin their chances for later." Elli removed her smile and turned to look at Jill.

Glenn nodded and walked away.

Jill chuckled. "You made that rather clear."

"Sometimes you have to be blunt with some guys." Elli took a drink and looked around again. She noticed several men were looking her way. "So what is Mars really like?"

"It's growing in population, that's for sure. Red City is the biggest town on Mars and has about twelve thousand people. Most companies and governments have their own buildings to house their workers and work areas. There are shops as well, most of them subsidized or run by larger

companies so that people working on Mars don't feel they're isolated. Of course, there're also bars and other places where you can relax. Mars isn't a bad place to spend time. More work than play but it's cold. Even with thermal suits on you can tell it's cold, but that's part of the deal making lots of money there."

"I gather there's not much partying there."

"No, most people are serious about work and the companies want to make sure their workers are being productive. It's also dangerous on Mars not to be fully alert when you're outside working."

"I'm starting to think I may have to party alone." Elli laughed.

"I doubt that. You'll definitely attract a few drinking partners." Jill finished her drink. "Come on, let's get out of here and find a place to get something to eat."

"What's wrong with here?"

"Too noisy. I want to talk to you about something."

They walked to an Italian style eatery, ordering food and wine. "Enjoy the wine, Elli. It's in short supply on Mars."

"I thought there was lots of booze on Mars."

Jill shook her head. "It's too expensive to ship alcohol to Mars when they need the space on ships to transport so much other stuff. On Mars they can produce other types of booze. Vodka and most spirits can be made on Mars easily enough. Even beer can be made in small quantities. But wine is different. You need to use grapes or other fruit which is not abundant in the Mars greenhouses, and then some types need to put in oak barrels. There aren't any oak trees on Mars yet."

"So we can drink wine here but not on Mars. I better enjoy this."

"I wanted to get out of the bar. It seemed we were going to get a few offers for drinks and I just wanted to talk to you about a couple of things."

"Sure. What did you want to talk about?"

"I'm under the impression you like to party and like meeting new people. That's good, but think of Red City like a small town. You sleep with a guy and pretty soon the whole town knows about it. It isn't much different here on the ship. If that guy who approached us happens to stay at Red City then you would cross paths with him again. So I just wanted you to know be careful with whom you get lucky with." She gave a grin. "Just so you know I'm speaking from personal experience."

Elli laughed. "I hope it was worth it."

Jill shook her head. "No, I'd have to say the night was forgettable but the following weeks weren't. I got propositioned a lot until word got around I wasn't about to sleep with half the town. I sure got a lot of free drinks though." She grinned.

“Okay, I get the hint. I didn’t know it was so obvious I was interested in meeting men.”

Jill laughed out loud. “Okay, short skirt, tight fitting top, a nice walk and you’re looking all around the bar. I think every guy’s radar was picking up that signal.”

Elli’s cheeks reddened. “I suppose that’s true.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re looking good and that’s a good thing. Let’s go to the Port Lounge. They have real time view of the Earth and I want to have one last look at it this close.”

The Port Lounge was filled with soft cushioned chairs, loveseats and couches scattered about in the semi-circular room. Most of the seats were positioned to see at least part of the huge viewing screen that wrapped around one half of the wall. The viewing screen was set to clear and showed the Earth hanging against a backdrop of black space.

Elli looked at a blue and white sphere. “Wow, that’s so pretty.” “It makes my heart ache when I see it like that.”

A waitress came by and took an order from them.

“I can see why.” Elli admired the view and noticed how quiet it was in the room. Low level jazz was being played through speakers and it was easy to hear conversations. She saw Jill wave at a couple of men. They turned and approached them, smiling.

“Jill, are you in for another tour of drudgery?”

Elli guessed the older of the two men appeared to be in his mid-forties. He was average height, medium build and Elli thought rather good looking with a friendly face. The second man was younger. Tall, slim with an angular face he was also good looking with his short, dark hair.

“Elli, this is Thomas Richards, a good friend of mine. I don’t know who this other gentleman is.”

Thomas introduced Riley Evans. The younger man looked at Elli, giving a quiet hello. She gave a friendly hello back and after they sat, asked them what they did.

Thomas chuckled. “We’re weathermen.”

“Weathermen?”

“It’s a less fancy name to describe what we do. Riley and I are climate control engineers. We are trying to influence a positive change in the Marian climate.”

“How do you change the weather on Mars? I mean, isn’t it changing by itself?”

Thomas smiled and leaned forward. “To explain that, you have to remember that Mars was essentially a dead world a few centuries ago. Of course, if one looks even further back in time, a few million years ago, it

still had some life on it and a billion or so years ago it was a wet world with simple life forms on it. Unfortunately, Mars was a bit too small to sustain an active core in its center. The core cooled, and that had a number of repercussions. The magnetic field stopped, allowing radiation from the sun hurt life forms, volcanoes, and other gas producing natural phenomena went quiet and oceans began to freeze solid without any heat from below to keep them liquid. There was also a climatic event where an asteroid blew the atmosphere away in a violent collision.”

Elli grinned when Thomas said ‘blew the atmosphere away’ almost making a comment. She wasn’t interested in that much detail Thomas was providing, but he had a nice voice for lecturing. She glanced at Riley, who was trying to surreptitiously observe her legs as he sat with a straight back in the armchair. She pretended she didn’t notice his interest and crossed her legs, revealing more thigh in his direction. *Let’s see if that inspires you to make a move.*

## Chapter Two

Riley Evans wished he could talk as easily as Thomas was doing with both women listening to him. He felt awkward as he sat in the background, trying to steal a few looks at the young woman's legs. It was a shorter skirt than he expected to see on the starship and his heart thumped when he first saw her. He never would have had the courage to go up to her as a stranger, but now he had an opportunity to talk to her, if only he knew what to say. He had never learned how to do small talk or what to say to women. When she crossed her legs his eyes traced a path from the bottom of her skirt down to her foot. *Does she know how beautiful she is?*

Riley only half listened to Thomas. He knew all about the past climate of Mars. He should, having finished at the top of the class in Climate Studies and in Geological Disturbances, minoring in earthquakes. Evans was a certified genius and received positive reviews for several papers he produced. Smart, tall with good looks he did attract a few women until they found out he was boring to be around. Riley accepted the position for Mars partly because there were fewer women there and his parents couldn't pressure him to find a partner like his younger brother and sister did. He also hoped that the women on Mars, if he was lucky enough to meet one, wouldn't mind talking about science. Too many women on Earth he found were more interested in gossip than facts.

Now Thomas was mentioning how they placed fusion bombs deep within Mars, right to the core. Riley knew the bombs were a marvel of technology at the time. Shaped like a teardrop and the size of a blimp, each of the eighteen burrowers dug their way to the core of Mars. It was a slow process, using a heated front nose, a constant low frequency to help break up rocks and a spiral band to drag material from the front to the back. The burrowers were also self-repairing and required enormous power to push their way through the solid ground. The project took over two years to accomplish and several more years for the results to be measured, but the core of Mars once again became hot enough to turn the iron into a liquid state. Heat rose toward the planet's surface making conditions on Mars sustainable for primitive life. A weak magnetic field began to protect the planet again from the solar wind.

"Volcanoes and geysers started to be active again and earthquakes were not uncommon." Thomas's eyes gleamed as he spoke. Today we have warmer temperatures, higher air pressure and some moisture content in the atmosphere. As weathermen, we need to move the air currents to maximize their warming effects. How do we do that you may ask?" Thomas turned

and looked at Riley. “I’ve been talking long enough. Why don’t you tell them?”

Riley stammered out his reply. “Well...that is...wind currents...they flow opposite of the rotation of the planet and also north and south toward and from the equator.” He took a deep swallow. “Regardless of their direction we can change how they move by modifying the temperatures on the ground. To do that, we place large bands of black or white on the surface that cause a variance in the air temperature. We also use satellites to focus the sunlight on specific areas to increase the ground temperatures. Regardless of the methods, we can alter the flow of the air and how the winds blow on Mars.”

Jill looked at Riley. “So that changes the climate on Mars?”

“Yeah, it moves the warm air where we want it and later it can help determine where precipitation falls.”

Thomas joined in. “If there is one man who can make it rain on Mars, this is him. He is a genius when it comes to climate control. We are lucky he choose to work on Mars.”

Elli gave him a smile. “So you’re the wizard of weathermen are you?” Riley felt his cheeks turning pink. “I wouldn’t say I was a wizard, just a scientist.”

Elli giggled. “Sure you’re a wizard. I can picture you waving a magic wand and changing the weather.”

Thomas laughed too. “If only it was that simple.” He pointed at the viewscreen. “That looks like the Isaac Newton.”

Riley was relieved the attention was directed away from himself and looked at the torpedo shaped starship. He knew the ship was half again as big as the Kumeu and was the newest of the starships, incorporating the latest technology.

Thomas continued to speak. “The Isaac Newton is also going to Mars, though with a difference. Only the upper most deck is used to carry passengers, all luxury suites. The rest of the ship is carrying cargo.”

Jill agreed. “Cargo is more valuable than people to Mars. Too bad. I understand it will arrive at Mars in only a few days.”

Riley spoke up. “At the present distance between Mars and Earth it will take less than four days, something like forty hours.”

Elli grinned. “Did you just calculate how long it takes another spaceship to travel to Mars?”

Riley squirmed in his seat. “Well, I just knew the time it takes the Kumeu to journey from Earth to Mars is eight days and the Isaac Newton can travel at four point eight times as fast, so I just made a simple calculation.”

She laughed. “You’re not just a wizard, you’re also a computer.”

Riley wasn't sure if she was giving him a compliment or not, but was glad when Jill spoke up to take the attention off him.

"It would have been nice to be on the Isaac Newton and get to Mars that quick. That's what I call fast."

Riley nodded, deciding not to elaborate that ships travelled between planets by compressing space in front of them. The actual physical speed of the starship was secondary to how much space was compressed by the inertial-mass drives.

Riley listened to the conversation, saying little. When he did make a comment, he saw Elli look at him as if she was amused.

Jill and Elli bid Thomas and Riley goodbye. Riley watched them leave and stared until they were out of sight.

"Got your eyes on that young lady?"

"I wish." Riley frowned. "I don't have much a chance with her." "Don't sell yourself short. She did look at you lots."

"I think she was amused whenever I spoke but not because she found me interesting."

Thomas chuckled. "At least she knows you exist. Now you just have to find out what she likes and do something about it."

## Chapter Three

Elli was enjoying her stay on the Kumeu, though she followed Jill's advice and not spend the night with any of the men...yet. She didn't lack company. Wherever she went, men would often start a conversation with her to the point where she started to go the Port Lounge just to be alone.

Elli sipped her drink as she looked at the white dots sprinkled against the night sky. She thought about home and how far away it was now, both in space and time. The stars reminded her of snowflakes and the winters she enjoyed as a child playing in the snow. *I remember sticking out my tongue, catching those flakes as they drifted down. When I get back to Earth, I'm going to take a trip back to Alberta just to make a snowman again.*

A smile creased her lips and later she made her way back to where the other bars were located.

The sign at Club Nobel attracted her attention, advertizing a music group called the Tempests. She understood on a starship most music groups were shown as a hologram, recorded previously on Earth. She knew the Tempests had a history of wild concerts, playing hard music behind two female performers and sometimes singers. While the music was good, their main source of notoriety was the antics of the women at the front of the stage.

Elli made her way to the front of the bar where a heavysset man was directing people to a woman operating a payment kiosk. She gave the security man a bright smile.

"Hey, what's up?"

"The Tempests are playing. Cover charge for them. The show starts soon." He gave her a smile back and hooked his thumb toward the kiosk.

"Well, I'm all by myself." She gave a small pout. "Are you going to charge me to sit all alone? That's not very nice."

"I have a job to do." He looked at her as she gave him a wink. "Alright. Just don't say nothing to anyone."

"Thanks, Sweetie." Elli bounced into the bar and began to look around. She said hello to familiar faces, men who had bought her drinks before, and continued to look for the best place to watch the show.

She spotted a familiar figure sitting alone at a table near the front but to the side of the stage. Elli walked over and sat next to him.

"Hi Wizard. I wouldn't have guessed you for a Tempests fan."

It took a moment for Riley to recover as he stared at her. "Well, I'm not a big fan. I like their music so I thought I'd take a look at them."

Elli grinned. “Yeah, like a long look at Sindy and Satin. Those two blondes attract a lot of attention, even when their clothes stay on.”

Riley looked embarrassed. “I didn’t come here just to see them.”

She waved a hand in his direction. “Oh don’t act so innocent. Those two are the main reason people come to see them.” She grinned at him. “I like watching them and you being a guy I would assume doubly so.”

She signalled for the waitress, ordered a drink and another for Riley. “I’m buying this round since you managed to get a good table.”

“Thanks, but you don’t have to do that. I’m glad to have your company”

“Maybe I’m just trying to get you drunk and take advantage of you later.”

For a moment he looked perplexed and then grinned. “For you I can be a cheap drunk.”

“What did you do today?” *It may take a few drinks to loosen him up. He acts like he’s terrified of me, or maybe it’s females in general.*

“Not much. I studied about Mars and went to the gym.”

“Gee, brains and brawn. Women are going to be falling over you if you keep that up.” She reached over and squeezed his arm. “Hey, there’s some muscle there after all.”

“I’m trying.” He gave a shrug. “How about you? What did you do today?”

“I slept in. I stayed up late last night, drank a bit too much and needed to recoup some energy. Later I went to a salon and got my nails done and that was my day.” She held up her hand to show off her fingers. “They did a good job but were a little pricey.”

He put his hand under her fingers and studied her nails. “They look real nice.”

“Looks like they’re about ready to start.” Elli pointed at the stage.

He looked around the stage area. “Eight projectors. That should show a lot of detail.”

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want to have any blurring of the blondes or all you guys would get upset.” Elli waved at the waitress to bring another round and leaned back to watch the show.

The concert started with just the four men playing their biggest hit. Elli watched the group’s leader. The muscular, dark skinned man didn’t wear a shirt and was soon his chest was gleaming with sweat as the song approached the end.

The two women entered the stage from opposite sides as the next song started. Sindy wore a green, skin-tight mini dress. She wiggled as she made her way across the stage in the matching stilettos, giving Satin a hug and a long kiss on the lips.

Satin was the shorter of the two blondes, made more obvious by going

barefoot. She wore a white lace dress that reached mid-thigh and a white collar with a metal ring at its front. As Satin walked a spotlight behind her revealed she had nothing underneath the dress.

Elli watched the two blondes sing together, occasionally putting an arm around each other. She suspected that their affection and sexuality toward each other was just an act, just a way of generating publicity. In previous shows Sindy acted the dominate of the two and during a show pull Satin's hair back and grope her.

Elli turned to Riley, partially yelling to make herself heard. "Do you think it's an act between Sindy and Satin?"

Riley studied them for a moment. "I'm not sure. I suspect they swing both ways. They refuse to discuss their relationship in public so maybe there's nothing there at all."

"Which one do you like better?"

"Sindy. She's got more personality. Satin just accepts whatever happens to her. She looks good, but acts like she doesn't know much."

"So you like a woman with a bit of fire in her." Elli nodded. "Good choice about Sindy. I'll bet she's wicked in bed."

He grinned. "Yeah, I think she might be. I'll give her call and ask her out."

"If she says yes, give me a call too. We could do a threesome." Elli saw the surprised look on his face. *Wizard, it wouldn't be the first time for me, but I'll bet it would be for you.*

Riley laughed nervously. "Well, if Sindy doesn't want to join us I guess there would be just the two of us."

Elli laughed. "In your dreams, Wizard." *At least you're thinking in the right direction. A few drinks and you're not so shy anymore.* "So what do you think they're going to do this time? At their last show, Satin bared her boobs. Do you think Sindy might pull off Satin's dress?"

Riley considered her question and shook his head. "No, because Satin isn't wearing anything under her dress. Bare tits are one thing, but the censors won't allow total nudity. Maybe Sindy will expose herself this time, though you never know with those two."

Elli watched the two blondes dance with each other, wondering what they had planned. She noticed Riley had slowed down on his drinking and was slurring his words. He hadn't made a move on her yet but she considered he was still too shy to do more than talk to her. *Your loss, Wizard. I'm yours if you make a move.*

The crowd reacted when Sindy began to pull Satin by the hair to a chair. She sat and dragged Satin over her lap. Satin waved her arms and legs but did nothing to stop Sindy from lifting her dress and administer a spanking. Her slaps were in step to the beat of the drums and continued

to the end of the song.

Elli laughed. "I didn't expect that."

Riley nodded. "A new act in their repertoire."

"That Satin pouts so much she deserved it. Hell, I'd like to spank her myself."

"Maybe you deserve one too."

"There's no doubt I do. I can be a brat."

They watched the rest of the concert, with the Tempests closing with their biggest hit. Cindy stayed aggressive with Satin, kissing and fondling her. When Satin resisted one, she received several slaps on her ass. The concert ended with Satin pulling Riley by the arm off the stage.

Eli tossed her hair back. "Come on, let's get out of here." Elli took his hand and led him to a coffee shop. "You're going to have a hangover if you don't get some water in you." She walked up to the counter and ordered two coffees and water.

"I don't usually drink this much." Riley plopped down in a chair.

"I can tell. I do, but it's nothing to be proud of if you can drink a lot." She smiled as he took the glass of water.

He took a long slow drink of the water and rubbed his face. "Part of the problem is the low oxygen. The ship is gradually lowering the air pressure and reducing the oxygen so that when we arrive at Mars, our bodies won't go into shock. You could also suffer the bends if they didn't do this gradually."

"Boy, you even think like a scientist when you're drunk."

"Sorry. Just the way I am." He hiccupped. "But when I look at you I'm not thinking like a scientist at all. You're very pretty and really nice to talk to."

Elli looked down at her coffee and looked back at him. "I think you're okay too." She stood. "Let's get you to your room while you still can walk."

She took his arm to help steady him, making the way to the elevators and to his room.

On his second try, he managed to press his thumb on the sensor pad to open the door and she pushed him inside.

"You're fading fast, Wizard."

"Yeah. That last drink...done it to me." He closed his eyes as he sat on the edge of the bed.

Elli shook her head. "More like the last three drinks." She pulled off his shirt, tossing it on the chair. She bent down, took off his shoes and pushed him down on his bed. "Get some rest. I'll talk to you tomorrow." She took one last look at him before exiting out of the room. *Not bad looking with his shirt off. I hope he feels better in the morning but he's not used to drinking much.*

Elli made her way to another bar, not feeling tired yet. She waved at men she knew and then saw Hank sitting with two other men.

“Hi, Uncle Hank. Can I sit here?”

“Sure, Elli. What are you drinking?”

“Rum.” She talked about the concert she went to. “Really good show.” Hank shook his head. “I don’t care much for that noise. You went alone?” “No, I sat with a friend.” She gave Hank a smile. “And yes, he was nice

guy and didn’t try anything.”

“Where is he now?”

“He had too much to drink and is sleeping it off right now.”

“Lordy. He has a date with a pretty girl like you and passes out? Either he’s stupid or a lightweight.”

Elli laughed. “Actually, he’s a genius. He’s just not used to drinking.”

One of the other men laughed. “Well, if you ever need a drinking partner who can last all night, you can always sit with us.”

Hank shook his head. “No way, Elli, too much drinking is not good for you. You and your boyfriend don’t have to drink a lot to have a good time.”

Elli nodded and smiled. *Hank sure watches out for me. Wizard as my boyfriend? Might be a possibility there.*

## Chapter Four

Riley moaned as he rolled out of his bed. *What the hell was I thinking last night? She must think I'm a real loser now. I had a chance with her and then I pass out. Damn, she's going to laugh the next time I see her.*

He didn't want to do anything but hide in his room but knew he had to get something to drink. Slowly and deliberately, he showered, dressed, and ventured out of his room. His notepad buzzed, and he looked at the hand-sized device. A message from Elli, asking him to give her a call when he got up.

Reluctantly, he called her. "Hi Elli. Sorry about last night." He looked at the screen and it seemed she was feeling better than he was.

"That's okay. I've been there too. You need to get something to eat. I'll meet you at the Port Lounge."

Riley felt pleased. *Maybe she likes me after all.* He dressed and made his way to the lounge.

The Port Lounge was quiet, as usual. When he found Elli, he saw she already had ordered glasses of water and juice.

"Here, drink up. What do you feel like eating?"

"Nothing." He ignored the waitress ready to take his order.

Elli smiled. "Bring him the soup of the day and some toast."

Riley finished the juice. "I wish I didn't drink so much last night. You must think I'm an idiot."

"No, I think you're really smart. I shouldn't have kept ordering drinks."

"Yeah, well I still drank them. Then I fall asleep before the evening is done."

Elli grinned. "No problem, thought the next time you pass out I'll take off all your clothes."

Riley blushed. "Thanks for putting me to bed. I feel embarrassed about that."

"I didn't mind."

Riley looked at his soup and took a hesitant taste of it.

"How's the soup?"

"Not bad. I think my stomach can handle it."

She watched him eat as she stretched out in her chair. "So tell me. Just how cold is Mars?"

"Depends where you are and the time of the year. Red City is near the equator so it gets warmer than the rest of Mars and it's summer right now. The last time I checked it hit five degrees Celsius. Of course, it gets a lot colder at night, maybe twenty below."

“That’s cold.”

“There are some areas that can get close to a hundred below. That’s near the poles. Mars is still warming up. The atmosphere is thickening and that helps keep the warmth in.”

“I heard that it’s hard to breathe on Mars.”

“It is. The air is only half as thick as on Earth so you need to carry an oxygen tank wherever you go.”

“That doesn’t sound much like fun.”

“I guess you get used to it.”

Elli grinned. “Yeah, thermal suits and oxygen tanks. This is going to be a lot of fun.”

“I think you can make Red City a fun place all by yourself.”

Elli sat up straight. “Wizard, did you just use a pickup line on me? You work well with a hangover.”

## Chapter Five

Elli made her way to one of the smaller lounges to meet Jill for lunch, spotting her at a table near a holographic wall screen that showed a quaint Dutch street.

“Hi, Elli. How’s the party girl doing?”

She laughed. “Less partying now. This lower air and oxygen has tired me out.”

“Yeah, that will kill a lot of drinking. How’s the social life? Meet up with any interesting men?”

“A few. I’ve had some interesting proposals. Most of the guys have been alright, not too aggressive.”

“Anyone in particular?”

Elli laughed. “Well, you won’t believe this, but do you remember that guy that came over to our table in the Port Lounge the first night with Thomas Richards?”

“Yeah, tall, good-looking young guy. Riley was his first name and he was shy.”

“Right. Well, I hooked up with him last night at Club Nobel, the Tempests were playing there.”

“That would be interesting. Two half-naked women dancing to music with you two drinking. How did that end up?”

Elli giggled. “I kept feeding him drinks to loosen him up and he ended up passing out. He made it to the end of the show but I had to help him to his room. Never even got a kiss out of him.”

Jill laughed. “Wow, that’s unreal. A date with you and he ends up passing out.”

“He was so embarrassed. I made sure he had breakfast this morning but he wasn’t looking too good.”

“Breakfast? Did you sleep with him?”

Elli shook her head. “No. I left him a message for when he got up. I wanted him to know we had unfinished business.”

“I should hope so. Just make sure you get a kiss before he drinks too much next time. What’s he like? Besides the drinking issue.”

“Nice. Smart too, not just academic but understands stuff. He just doesn’t have any experience with drinking or women.”

“I think you can teach him about both.” Jill laughed.

\* \* \* \*

Elli wandered around the ship, looking at clothes and beauty accessories. *What do I need to get his attention? He might be shy but he hasn't even tried to touch me yet.*

Elli made a few purchases and called Riley.

“Hey, Wizard, how’re feeling?”

“Not too bad. I’m just watching some boring video because I don’t have the energy to do anything else.”

“Want some company doing nothing?”

“Sure. Wait, are you hungry? I haven’t eaten anything today other than the soup.”

“I could eat. Where do you want to go?”

“There’s that pizza place near the Port Lounge.”

“You always go there. Let’s try the Blue Plate Diner. It has good reviews.” “It’s a bit formal.”

“I know, but we don’t have many nights left before we reach Mars and it will be good to have dinner at a place where you don’t eat with your fingers.”

“Alright. Want me to meet you there or at your cabin?”

“Meet me there in an hour.” Elli hurried to her cabin, planning what she was going to wear. *Short skirt. He likes my legs. I wonder if he knows that there is a dance floor connected to the restaurant?*

Elli made her way to the Blue Plate Diner, entering after checking that Riley had already been seated. She smoothed down the black fabric of her mini-dress as she stepped around the tables.

“Hi, Wizard.” Elli smiled as he looked up from the table. She watched his eyes go from her face to the V neckline of her dress, to her bare legs and back to her face.

Riley stood from his chair, almost knocking it backwards to the floor.

“Hi, Elli. Sorry, I was daydreaming and didn’t see you come in.”

Elli sat. “What were you daydreaming about?”

“Martian oceans. I was considering the effect of an ocean on the climate on Mars.”

“There aren’t any oceans on Mars now.”

“As the core of Mars continues to send heat to the surface the frozen water locked in the ground will turn to liquid. Also the warming on the air will thaw surface water. So we will have oceans again on Mars. I was trying to calculate how that would change air currents.”

“I was hoping you were having thoughts about me.” She gave him a pout. His eyes widened. “I was thinking of you earlier but got nervous about you showing up, so I thought about Mars.”

Elli gave him a grin. “I was just teasing you, but it’s nice to know

you were thinking about me.”

They ordered an appetizer and main courses, plus a bottle of wine. Elli knew he didn't drink much but considered a couple glasses of wine might help him relax a little. *He's as nervous as a teenager on his first date. Is it me or all women that scare him?*

“So besides passing out, what did you think of the Tempests show?”

Riley gave an embarrassed grin. “Yeah, sorry I did that. I liked the concert. Music was better than I expected.”

“And what about Sindy and Satin?”

“They were interesting.”

“Very. What did you think about their little special act?”

“The spanking?”

“Yes, the spanking.” Elli grinned. “I thought it was rather intriguing. Actually rather sexy. You?”

Riley nodded. “I found it interesting too.”

Elli giggled. “Interesting? Now that's an understatement. Careful. You may give away your real desires there.”

The food was excellent and Riley relaxed as he drank the wine. He talked about other things besides Mars and science, recalling a vacation he took with his buddies. “It turned out we had all this food, a camp stove and no one knew how to cook. So we ended going to town for pizza every night.”

Elli laughed. “So what did you do with all the food?”

“The part that wasn't burnt we kept in the cooler for when we got home. We had fun anyway, and we got to try every pizza joint in town.”

She stood. “Let's dance.”

“I don't dance.”

She grabbed his hand. “Sure you do. Don't you want to have an excuse to put your arm around me?”

Riley followed her to the dance floor between to the dining room and a lounge. A holographic band played in front of one wall with a mirrored wall on the opposite end.

Elli tried not to stare at him. His dance moves were almost mechanical, though at least in time with the music. Elli felt comfortable with her own dance steps, turning in a circle as she shifted her hips around. After a few songs, the music dropped to a slower movement.

She spread out her arms. “Come on, Wizard. You know you want to.”

He swallowed and put his hand on her waist.

Elli noticed his slow dancing was better than his earlier steps, but was holding her too far away, almost as if they were ballroom dancing. *Why the space between us? This won't do.*

She pulled at his shoulders, pressing their bodies together and heard

him take a sudden intake of air. *Oh! That's why the distance. He has a hard on.*

Elli waited a few steps and looked up from his chest. "Wizard," she whispered, "do you like your women soft to the touch?"

"Yeah."

"Women like their men hard to the touch, and you feel just fine." She continued to press against him, not allowing him to separate from her. The dance was coming to a close, and she looked up at him. *Time to kiss the girl, Wizard.*

Riley leaned forward as he wrapped his arms around her torso. He dropped his head and pressed his lips to hers.

Elli thought the first kiss was short, but he returned for a second kiss, pressing harder on her mouth. *Nice kisser, at least he isn't trying to jam his tongue down my throat.*

He broke off the kiss and they headed back to their table, holding hands. "Elli, thanks for the dance. Sorry I was reluctant. I know I'm not very good at dancing."

"Your dancing was fine and your kisses were great."

He walked her back to her cabin and stood at her door, kissing her several times as he held her.

Elli was amused and disappointed he didn't touch her anywhere, almost ready to place his hand on her breast. *He may have a heart attack if I did that and I don't want to scare him away. This is going a lot slower than I expected.*

\* \* \* \*

"So you finally got a kiss from him." Jill laughed as Elli related the events of the night before.

"He was so careful how he held me, like I would break or something. I expected him to slide his hands around me a bit but he kept his hands on my waist and back. I wore the sexiest dress I had, but he protected my virtue."

"And what virtue would that be?"

Elli stuck her tongue out at Jill. "Hey, I'm going slow like you suggested but this is getting a little frustrating."

"Good things are worth waiting for. I think Riley is a pretty good catch. Maybe you need to hint more what you want."

"Hint more? I did the grind of the hips on the dance floor, told him I like men when they are hard and even told him I thought the spanking on the Tempests show was sexy. Anymore hinting I would have to do a lap dance."

Jill laughed. "I hope you don't have experience in that area."

Elli grinned. "Let's just say I know a lot of different dance steps."

“So what is your next dance step with him?”

“I’m going to meet him at the Oasis Lounge. I’ll see where that leads us.”

\* \* \* \*

Elli spotted Riley sitting at a small table, watching a video displayed on a wall screen. The video showed the coastline of an island taken from a moving boat. She considered the video was meant to match with the decor of the lounge but looked silly in the middle of a starship.

“Hey there, Wizard. Watching the home movie?”

He jumped. “Oh, hi, Elli. I was watching the clouds in the video, trying to determine how they were reacting to a front.”

She sat and shook her head. “Do you always look at everything as a weather forecast?”

“Sorry. I guess I got bored sitting here.”

Elli felt puzzled. “How long ago did you get here?”

Riley look embarrassed. “I didn’t want to be late, so I got here early.”

“Sounds like you got here way too early. Let’s order some drinks, we need to celebrate.”

“Sure. What are we celebrating?”

“It’s a secret. I’ll tell you later.” Elli changed the subject, asking him about climate control.

“...so the biggest thing is to increase the humidity to the point where we will get precipitation. Currently, the only place where that happens is near the poles and that’s snow. What we want is something to fall near the equator. Even if it’s snow, it will either melt or evaporate. In both cases it will help lead to more precipitation.”

Elli smiled. “You really take this climate change seriously.”

“I have to. Climate change can make Mars habitable. That’s important.” “You know what else is important?”

“What?”

Elli stood and went around the table to sit on his lap. She wrapped her arm around his neck. “My secret.” She kissed his cheek and began to nibble at his ear.

“Secret?” he stammered out.

“Yes, my secret. I’ll tell you what it is.” She kissed him on the lips. “You’re going to get laid tonight. In my cabin. Now finish your drink and let’s get out of here.” His skin felt warm under her arm and sweat broke out on his forehead. “Wizard, I believe you are getting a little excited here.”

\* \* \* \*

“So how was it?” Jill leaned forward as she grinned.

“Well, he’s tall, and that seems to be his general proportions.”

“That sounds promising. I assume he was a little inexperienced.”

“He was, but made up for it after the first round.” She sighed and closed her eyes.

“Elli, you look like a girl that has been swept off her feet.”

She blushed. “Na, he’s just another guy. Lots more of those on Mars.”

Two days later Elli stared at the white, thin clouds scattered over the red surface of Mars. She leaned against Riley and whispered. “It looks wonderful.”

Riley swung his arm around her as they sat on a loveseat in the Port Lounge. “It is an amazing planet. You can’t see it from here but on the northern hemisphere there’re a string of volcanoes that are erupting right in the middle where there used to be an ocean.”

“Volcanoes? Kind of dangerous isn’t it?”

“No, they’re not near any human settlements. But they are helping build the atmosphere and warm up the planet.”

“That’s nice. I like being warm.” She yawned. “Now that we have stared at Mars for an hour, can we go to bed? We’ll be walking on the surface tomorrow and will see it real close up then.”

“Alright, but it’s not often you get to see Mars and its two moons.”

“Yes, very romantic.” She grabbed his hand and tugged on him to follow her.

Riley happily went with her to her cabin, hoping they could share accommodations when they arrived on Mars.

## Chapter Six

Elli smiled at Riley and looked out the shuttle window. She squeezed his hand as the shuttle vibrated and broke free from the Kumeu, spiralling downward to the planet's surface. She inhaled deeply from the thin plastic oxygen tube that travelled from the orange tank attached at her hip to the headband that held it in place above her upper lip. The valve in the tube released oxygen only as she breathed in and varied its supply according to how deeply she breathed. The thermal suit she wore enabled her to survive on the Martian surface for extended periods of time.

Red City was not as she expected and composed of only clinical and scientific structures. Instead, there was also smaller buildings, joined together that formed streets, looking like a small town only with the larger buildings forming a ring around the outside.

"It looks the opposite of a normal city with tall buildings in the centre."

"True." Riley looked at the plastic sheet that showed the locations of the different facilities. "The tall buildings are used as a buffer against the winds that blow across the surface. Not much velocity but they carry a lot of dust. Want to take a walk around? We don't have to report for work until tomorrow."

"Sure." Elli gave him a kiss. "Why don't you show me the town?"

Like all the residents of Mars, they moved slowly in the thin air. Elli found the air cool, but not hard to breathe. The shops in the centre of Red City sold small items and clothing among coffee shops and bistros. She browsed through the shops and stopped with Riley to have a tea.

"Not too shabby Wizard. At least there's more to do here than just work."

"They're adding more shops toward the south. The Martian government believes they have to keep moral up and make lots of recreation available to the workers. There're less accidents and higher productivity if people have something to do during their off time."

"So they aren't doing this just to be nice?" Elli laughed.

"No, but we might as well take advantage of it."

Riley led the way to a small bar where a double set of doors allowed them to enter after a small blast of air greeted them.

"The buildings on Mars are all pressurized. It helps keep the dust out but also allows increasing the oxygen levels and humidity." Riley pointed to a small table to sit at by a window. Only a few patrons were in the bar, leaving open areas.

The bartender, a man in his early twenties, brought them two ciders.

“Here you go. Two Martian made ciders.”

Elli looked at the pale drink and took a sip. “Tastes alright, though weak.”

The bartender shrugged. “On Mars they like to keep the alcohol content low. You’d never get drunk on this stuff on Earth, but here on Mars with the lower oxygen it can have a stronger effect.”

“It looks like being on Mars cuts down on drinking a bit.” Elli took another small drink.

“We can find other things to do to occupy our time.” He reached for her hand.

She gave his hand a quick squeeze and pulled it away. “Look, Wizard, I really like you. You’re great to be around. But I’m not ready for an exclusive relationship yet. I’ve had a lot of changes in my life lately and moving to Mars means I had to give up all of my old friends. I need to adjust to being so far away from home and I want—need to meet new people.” She saw the hurt in his face. “I still want to hang around with you but just not all the time.” She gave him a small smile.

“Sure. Hey, I gotta go and get ready for tomorrow.” He stood and left.

Elli sighed as she watched him leave.

\* \* \* \*

Elli entered one of the labs of BioGeo and headed straight to her workstation. As usual she was greeted by almost everyone. The men, she noted, changed their posture as she walked by them. She was flattered by their attention to her although none of them had made any advances towards her. The lone other woman in the lab was not friendly toward her and seemed resigned that Elli would attract all the male attention when she was around. The other factor making her happy to go to work was that she was accomplishing something. She realized she had an innate ability to identify the small fossils processed through the lab and had flagged two new species. The simple creatures were small, and meant to live in water. All lab tests so far had shown they were distantly related to Earth life forms, strengthening the theory that life had transported from one of the planets to the other.

“Elli.” John Reese, a tall middle aged man with brown hair, called her over to his office.

Elli took a drink from the water bottle that was always attached to her hip and followed her manager. “Hi, John. What’s up?”

“I got a transmission from one of the exploration companies. They have some images they want to send to us but this one guy, a Henry Silvers, asks that you get to see them first.” John raised his eyebrows. “Anything I should know before I forward the file to you?”

Elli smiled. “Uncle Hank. He said that if he x-rayed any whales when he was looking for water he would give me a call.”

John laughed. “I don’t think we’ll see any whales, but let’s look at what he has sent.” He played with a control on his desk and a wall in his office became a viewscreen, showing the transmission sent by Hank. Another touch on his desk caused the attachment to open.

Elli gasped. “Wow. Look at that!”

John nodded. “Unbelievable.” He stared at the white skeleton remains that looked like it may have belonged to an eel.

“It’s not a whale but still amazing. That creature has to be at least the size of my forearm. That makes it the longest Martian creature we found so far.”

“It does. Too bad it’s a few hundred metres underground. Going to be a devil to dig up. Still, a big discovery. Congratulations, I’ll make sure your name goes on the official records. Is Henry Silvers really your uncle?”

Elli shook her head. “No, just a friend. He does make a good uncle though.”

\* \* \* \*

Elli sent a message to her parents when she went back to her apartment. It was only a one way conversation due to the time difference for light between Mars and Earth, but it was the only way to talk to her parents. She eagerly told them about her work in the lab and the latest discovery. Then she added a brief note she had dated a few men including a young man that she had met on the flight over to Mars. “He’s nice, and we get along really well.” She gave a shrug. “Actually, I think you would approve of him which makes me wonder why I like him too.” She giggled. “Anyway too soon for any romance with of them, but I wanted you to know I’m not out partying every night but not being a recluse either.” Then just before she signed off, she added. “Love you both.” *How often have I said that in the past few years?*

## Chapter Seven

The blast of warmer, higher pressured air hit her face as she entered the bar. She did a quick scan, saw a few familiar faces and waved to co-workers. They looked like they wanted her to join them but she didn't want to become too friendly with people she was working with. A few too many drinks and she might have an uncomfortable time the next day at work.

Instead, she wandered up to the bar and ordered a drink and leaned against the counter thinking about whom she wanted to socialize with. Like most of the crowd, she had changed out of her coveralls, selecting a t-shirt and a pair of tight pants. She knew she was getting a few stares from the men, which was why she was wearing the form-fitting outfit. It also caused a few women to give her the evil eye. While she didn't want to make any enemies, she was determined to do what was best to meet some men. *Don't worry ladies. I'm only after the single guys. Withdraw those claws.*

She exhaled, feeling warm again. She didn't wear a coat on her short jog to the bar from her apartment, not wanting to cover up her t-shirt that featured a lacy back. The minus five temperature outside chilled her a bit, but she didn't want to worry about her coat as she planned to drift about the bar. Two men for every woman. *The odds are definitely in my favour.*

She didn't expect to see Riley tonight. It wasn't likely they would end up in the same bar, though she suspected he would sometimes check a few bars to see where she was. Elli went out with him, even went to bed with him, but she made it clear he was not the only man in her life and he better get used to her being busy. Tonight she knew he was working late on a project, having to travel several kilometres out from Red City, and wasn't likely to be in any bar. That made her feel more comfortable in her mind as she felt guilty when he saw her leave with another guy.

"Hey, Elli, you going to nurse that drink all night?" Davis grinned at her and pulled out a chair for her with one arm as he sat on another. Davis was average height but built like a fighter with broad shoulders on top of a thick body. His grin was lopsided from a scar along his jaw line. The two other men looked at her as if she was holding a cold beer in a desert.

"I'm planning on being able to walk out of here tonight, so the drinks are going down slow." She rested one hand on his shoulder, feeling the dense muscle.

"Don't worry about it. I'll carry you to bed if you can't walk."

She laughed. "I bet you would. My bed or yours?"

"Whichever is closer."

“You’re bad.” Elli walked to another table and talked to four men and one frowning woman. Then she began to scout for her best opportunity for the night. After three more drinks, she found she had returned where she started. “You came back and still walking.”

“Yeah. Just in case I decided I didn’t want to walk anymore I could use you as transport.”

Davis gave her a quick introduction to his two friends and then ignored them, turning his attention on Elli.

Elli let him try to charm her, laughing at his jokes and touching his arm. She kept her legs facing toward him and didn’t brush away his hand as they rested on her thigh. Occasionally his fingers massaged her leg and after a few seconds, she would stop him, knowing he would try again.

“Well Davis, it has been good seeing you again, but it’s time for me to get going.”

“Sure, doll. I’ll walk you back to your place.” He stood. “Want my coat?” “Then you’ll get cold.”

He shook his head. “Not me. Thick skin to go with my thick head.”

Elli let him help her with the coat, losing her arms in the sleeves. “You could put two of me in here.”

“Double the pleasure then.”

She laughed and stepped outside the bar.

“Where do you live?”

“Block C apartments.”

“Okay, hop on.” He turned his back to her and bent over, holding his arms out to his sides.

“You’re crazy.” She jumped on his back, wrapping her arms around his neck and he began to jog down the street. She suspected on Earth he might have run but on Mars knew the limit of his lungs. Still she knew he had to be in good shape to go as fast as he did. As far as carrying her, she guessed he barely noticed her weight.

It was only a five minute trip and Elli looked across the street. She gasped as she saw Riley walking the other way, carrying a case of instruments from his work in the field. Even at a distance, she could see the profound sadness on his face.

Davis didn’t seem to be aware of the change in her mood after they arrived at her apartment. She invited him in, had another drink and took him to bed.

Eli gave him a kiss goodbye in the morning, made herself a tea and stared at a wall. She thought about calling Riley but hesitated each time started. By lunchtime she was still alone in her apartment with a cold cup of tea, the memory of Riley’s face in her mind. *Sorry, Wizard. I think I really screwed up last night.*

## Chapter Eight

In Tim's Coffee Shop she spotted Riley sitting with a man that she knew worked with him at climate control. Riley didn't seem to be talking or doing much other than drinking a tea. The small cafe was busy with people trying to grab a quick lunch before returning to work.

Elli approached him from his side. "Hey there."

Riley looked startled for a moment. "Hi, Elli."

She pursed her lips as she sat. There was still sadness in his face and she wondered if he would get upset with her even more. "I was hoping we could talk, maybe tonight if you're free."

Seconds ticked by before he answered. "Sure. I'm free, as usual."

\* \* \* \*

Elli stirred her drink and took a sip. She had given up giving him smiles. His return smile looked more like a grimace than a look of happiness. The bar was quiet with a few patrons eating snack food but she noted he picked a table in the far corner. "How are doing, Wizard? You look really sad and I'm worried about you."

"I am sad." He squeezed his hand into a fist for a moment and then with concentration opened his hand palm down on the table. "Elli, I just can't go out with you anymore. I want to, but when I see you with another guy, I think I'm going mad. I know you like to date different guys but I just can't..." His fist returned. "I just can't continue seeing you. Maybe we can be friends someday, but right now it's just too painful."

Elli ran her fingers through her hair and bit her lower lip. "Wizard, can I have another chance?" She reached for his hand and uncurled his fingers. "You. I will date only you until, well, whatever happens."

"Are you sure you want to do that?"

"I said it and I mean it. I care a lot about you and want to take a chance on you."

He finally smiled. "I'm all in."

\* \* \* \*

Elli opened the door for Riley and invited him into her apartment. He was acting reserved since their meeting in the bar. He still kissed her and bedded her once more but it appeared he was holding back from getting too close to her. She understood his reluctance and thought it would take longer to relax with her. When he invited her to go with him on a field trip, she jumped at the opportunity to mend the relationship with him. Either things would improve, or if they didn't, she wasn't going to be alone long.

He looked around and frowned. "You have a lot of stuff here. You

may need a larger apartment soon.”

“Maybe you and I can switch apartments.” She laughed.

Riley’s apartment was larger than hers. He had hinted at one time they should move in together, as couples qualified for an even larger apartment. But Elli was still reluctant about going that step with him. She knew if she moved in with him it would be hard to break it off with him and she still wasn’t sure if he was the one for her yet. “I’m waiting for a promotion so they’ll give me a larger pad.” She grinned at him. “Relax, I like lots of stuff around me.” She checked her water bottle and air tank to make sure they were full. Checking and double-checking the water and air had become second nature to her. The monitor on her wrist showed her vital signs and gave a warning when the blood showed low oxygen or low hydration.

Riley nodded. “Alright. Ready to go?”

Elli headed towards the door. She was looking forward to going on a trip with him to visit where a large ancient Martian lake used to reside. He needed to set up test equipment and her BioGeo agreed to give her the time off to go with him, providing she come back with some samples to test for extinct life forms.

\* \* \* \*

The vehicle they signed out was a six wheeled all terrain enclosed truck. He set it on automatic mode, driving itself to a designated location.

Elli stared out the windows at the red landscape. “It looks so dead. Nothing but red sand and rock.”

“The surface looks that way, but underneath things are changing. Water is forming under the surface as the frozen soil melts.” He pointed to the sky. “More clouds now. The relative humidity hit forty percent yesterday in Red City. The climate is changing faster now.”

Elli looked up at a cloud. “It seems so low.”

“It is. Less atmosphere means the clouds sit lower. We just need those clouds to drop rain or snow. Then we may get streams and rivers again.”

“Well, let’s not wait for the rain. I’m looking forward to going to the lake and relaxing on the beach.”

Riley laughed. “You’ll have trouble seeing the difference between the lake and a sandy beach.”

Elli gave him a slow smile. “Don’t worry. My imagination will make it feel just like a beach.”

\* \* \* \*

As Riley indicated, the difference where the lake used to be and the shore was almost nonexistent. Elli could see the difference after he pointed out the slight change in elevation at the ancient shoreline. “Okay, Wizard, now what do we do? Make sand castles?”

“We drive out to where the lake used to be. I need to set up test equipment and do some drilling.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What are we looking for?”

“The core is heating up and spreading heat upward, thawing the frozen water underneath. Satellites have detected water vapour above the lake during the daytime, and at night, we have visuals of frost. There are a couple of theories about this. One is that the water vapour in the planet is flowing to the low areas like the lake.”

“What do you think Wizard?”

“I think the water vapour is coming up from the lake bed. I have a theory that the ground under the surface is saturated with ice and sand.”

Elli grinned. “If I was to take a bet, it would be you’re right.”

“Thanks.” He looked at her. “You make me feel good.”

“That’s because I...think you’re special.” Elli blushed and looked away. “I want to walk around outside and see what it’s like.” *I can’t believe I almost said it. He’s getting out too. I hope he doesn’t follow me around like a puppy.*

Elli saw him approach and gave him a grin. “Nice beach sand, a little on the red side but nice and soft.” She gave the ground a kick, sending a cloud of dust floating away.

Riley looked at the dust cloud fade away. “I guess that’s one of the few things you can do on a beach here.”

Elli looked around. “I know one more thing to do here.” She lay down on her back and moved her arms from her sides to the top of her head as she spread her legs back and forth. “Sand angels.” She got up and looked at the impression she left in the sand. “I used to make snow angels when I was a kid and I guess this works pretty good too.”

Riley stood by her side and squeezed her hand. “You do like the snow, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I miss the white stuff. Good memories I suppose.”

\* \* \* \*

The vehicle made steady progress across the flat ground. After an hour, Riley stopped the progress.

“This is as good a spot as any. Let’s unpack.”

Elli jumped out of the vehicle, breathing in the cool air and wondering if Riley had picked up her stumbled statement on her feelings for him. *It would have been nice if he just grabbed and kissed me. He’s just so polite and careful with me, maybe too much.*

She watched him set up monitors, using a small mallet to pound the sensors into the soft ground. She remembered him telling her they monitored various air chemicals, temperature and humidity. Then he pulled drilling equipment out and set about assembling a tripod on the ground. A

few minutes later, he struggled to put a motor on top of the tripod and attach a drilling auger.

“Okay, let’s see if I put this together right.” He pushed the button of a remote control and the drill started to turn against the soil but didn’t penetrate the surface. He stopped the button and looked puzzled.

“Hey, Wizard.”

“Yeah?” He looked back at her.

*Oh my God. That’s a look of love. What do I do with that?* “You have the drill turning backwards.”

He looked back at the drill and the remote control. “Well, that would explain the lack of traction.” He grinned, pushed a couple of controls and the drill turned in the opposite direction and buried into the ground.

Elli watched. Her jump suit provided electric warmth but she found she was getting to warm. She looked at her wrist monitor. *I’m breathing in oxygen faster. Damn, I’m either running up hill or horny.*

Riley retracted the drill and removed a cylinder, inserted another length of tubing and started the drill bit on a downward plunge. He examined the clear plastic cylinder he had removed. “Much like you would expect. But if you look carefully at the bottom, I think there are some white particles that may be from life forms.” He showed her the tube.

Elli smiled. The white specks were too small to say what they were, but she felt instinctively they were remains of shells of sea creatures. “I think you’re right. Now let’s go deeper and see what else there is.”

The next three cores showed more sand and white remains of the Martian life. The white deposits were progressively bigger, and it was possible to distinguish some small shells.

“Wizard, this is amazing. I have never seen so many creatures in such small volume of rock. This ancient lake must have been teeming with life at one time.”

He agreed. “Yeah, this must have been a hotbed of life. Let’s go for another core.”

The next sample showed creatures half an inch in length, making Elli ecstatic. “Wow! Look at them all. This is absolutely amazing. The density of life forms is amazing, equal to what you’d find on Earth.” She held an electronic magnifier to the tube and gasped. “This is the find biologists only dream of finding. Mars was not only alive, but it was complex and dense.”

Riley pulled out the last tube from the drilling equipment, the maximum depth for which it was designed. This time he got excited. “Look!”

She stared at the core, noticeably darker than the previous samples.

He gestured at the core. “Ice! It’s wet! Water! This is where the humidity is coming from. The ice is turning into water vapour before melting. This has major significance with climate change. Mars is going to become warmer and more liveable than we thought possible.” He sat down on the ground staring at the hole in the ground from the drill. “I can’t believe this.”

“You were right about Mars. You’ve made history.”

He nodded. “This was a wet world. It was alive.”

“And maybe again.”

“What do you mean?”

“The creatures caught in the ice...when you unthaw them sometimes a few returns to life. The one cell creatures are very resilient.”

“You’re right. We better store that sample carefully.”

“I’m going to celebrate this.” Elli undid her air tank and unhooked her water bottle.

“How?” He watched her unzip her jumpsuit.

“I’m going skinny dipping in Wizard’s lake.” She took off her boots, thermal socks, jumpsuit and her one-piece underwear. She stretched out her arms and ran around him in a circle. “Yahoo! A lake on Mars with life.” Riley watched her as he pivoted, puffing as he gawked at her naked body.

Elli filled her lungs with the thin Martian air, soon running out of breath. She was surprised she didn’t feel the cold, not certain if it was the sun or her own excitement that kept her warm. *I need some air but after wearing two layers of clothes every day this feels good on the skin. I hope Wizard does something other than gape at me.*

Riley strode toward her, wrapped his arms around her as they tumbled to the ground.

As he kissed her, Elli pulled down the zipper of his jumpsuit and fumbled with the fly of his underwear. “I’m going to tell you right now, this ground is fucking cold. Do it quick.” She opened her mouth to his kiss and felt him slide into her.

\* \* \* \*

She grinned at him as they made their way back to Red City. “Hey Wizard.”

“Yeah?”

“You know I’m not wearing anything but this jumpsuit, don’t you?” She unzipped the suit and moved a hand inside.

He closed his eyes for a moment. “It’s on my mind.”

“Then put this thing on autopilot.” She undid her jumpsuit and stepped over to straddle him. “I like sex and a lot of it.” She kissed him long on the mouth. “I would suggest if you want me, keep me satisfied.”

## Chapter Nine

Elli returned to work early the next day, eager to test the samples she received from the cores.

John Reese walked over to her workstation. “Quite the discovery at that ancient lake site with that frozen water. I understand there are a lot of ancient life forms in there.”

“I was hoping to check those life forms right away. Riley gave me a sample to test here.”

“Riley, is he your boyfriend?”

Elli blushed. “He is.”

“Well, that was very considerate of him. Usually it takes weeks to get samples and then degraded ones at that. You’re right that a small percentage of simple life forms can be brought back to life after being frozen, and you have a lot of samples there. So maybe we’ll get lucky.”

She smiled. “That is good to hear.”

He nodded and began to turn away. “Oh, one more thing.”

She looked up at him.

“There are a number of satellites around Mars taking various readings.” He shrugged. “Also photographs.”

Elli continued to look at him, wondering what he was getting to.

He whispered, “Congratulations on being the first naked human on Mars.” “Oh my God.” Elli covered her face with her hands.

“Some may have already seen images, but I immediately had the images filed under restricted access. I believe the government of Mars will not release the images because they don’t want Earth to think we just party here. However, there is knowledge on Mars someone did enjoy an extra bit of freedom. Be prepared for a few winks.”

Elli watched him walked away. *You mean I was the first to do that? I hope they don’t put up a statue of me for that.*

\* \* \* \*

“Elli, we’re so proud of you. And so happy you’re doing well on Mars.” Elli’s father grinned after speaking.

Her mother leaned forward towards the screen. “We’re also curious about that young man you mentioned. What’s his name and what does he do on Mars?”

Elli listened to their questions and encouragement received the latest news on the family and prepared her reply. They would get her video much later but wanted to answer while their questions were still fresh in her mind. She told them only his first name so they wouldn’t be able to do a data

search on him and told them only that he worked for the government. Then she went to bed, wondering about his suggestion about sharing an apartment. It was strange that when he first asked if she wanted to share an apartment she didn't think it was a big deal. She had shared accommodation with other lovers before and initially she considered Riley to be just one more. But the more she thought about him the more she began to think if she was to ever move out afterward, it would be devastating for him. *I'm not moving in with you Wizard unless I'm absolutely sure. I just don't want to hurt you that much.*

\* \* \* \*

Elli walked past the glass and metal towers to the Fourth Rock, a favourite bar for her and Riley. As usual, she checked the weather monitor located high above the centre of town. She smiled at the record high humidity of fifty- six percent. Once every few weeks a record was set on the Mars weather station. Sometimes it was the humidity, sometimes the wind velocity and occasionally a new temperature with the record now at fourteen degrees above freezing.

She was also the first member of an unofficial club called the Flash Club, composed of a few humans that shed their clothes outside on Mars. It was not a club she would tell her parents about but a few of her friends knew.

Riley was waiting for her when she arrived and after exchanging a kiss talked about work.

“So, John told me the life we reactivated from the core sample is identical to Earth life forms. Really ancient bacteria that still can be found in some areas of Earth. I guess I don't get to name it but get the credit of finding it.”

“I heard more news. Apparently, some lichens were discovered on a rock at about five degrees latitude north. Just a speck of it so it was hard to see them, but they were alive. They couldn't take a sample for DNA testing as it was too small, so it could be actual Marian life forms or contamination from Earth, but it was living on the Marian surface.”

“Mars is being terraformed right in front of our eyes. I wonder how long before we can plant flowers and stuff outside the greenhouses?”

“That might be awhile and likely they'll have to modify the plants to live here, but it will happen.”

“It's going to have to. Did you know two more babies were born last month? Both girls.” Elli grinned. “Women are going to take over Mars.”

“I heard. The doctors are happy the babies are doing so well. They seem to adapt to the Martian environment fairly well, though they are in protected rooms with higher humidity and oxygen.”

Elli nodded. “What do you think about having kids on Mars?”

“I think if humans are serious about colonizing Mars then you have to be able to raise a family here. It’s a bit scary, wondering how well they will adapt to the conditions on Mars. Weaker gravity probably will affect their bone structure and end up making them taller, but who knows until they grow up.”

“I meant you personally.”

“Oh.” He looked away for a moment before taking a drink. “I like kids, but never thought of having any myself. I don’t know.”

“Maybe it’s something you better figure out before getting too serious with someone. You know, it could be a deal breaker.”

“How about you? Do you want kids?”

Elli shook her head. “You give me your answer first and then I’ll let you know.”

## Chapter Ten

Elli felt the cool air on her face as she walked into the Fourth Rock. She looked around for Riley but didn't see him. *Working late again, I suppose. He said he was doing a special project, but he sure puts in a lot of extra work. Maybe if I worked harder, I would have never gotten into the mess I did. Of course then I wouldn't been sent to Mars and met him.*

She crossed the bar and sat by herself to wait for him, suspecting he wouldn't be much longer. Riley was rarely late for any appointment and seemed to have a built in alarm clock.

"Hi there. Haven't seen you for a while." Davis pulled out an empty chair and sat looking at her with a big grin.

"Hi Davis. I guess I've been busy. Also I guess I'm seeing someone, kind of exclusively, if you know what I mean."

"I gotcha. You're out of the market. Figures, a girl like you is going to have lots of choices. Lucky guy to get you."

"Thanks." She blushed.

"Let me buy you a drink and I'll let you be."

"Sure." Elli listened to him talk about the latest shipment from Earth that contained more plants and animals.

"It's the first stage of establishing life forms on Mars besides people."

"That's good to hear. I would like to see some cats and dogs. That would be great."

"Someday soon I would think."

Elli looked up. "There's my boyfriend."

Davis stood. "I best be going then." He turned and acknowledged Riley. "Nice catch, young fella."

Riley sat. "Sorry I'm late."

"That's okay. I talked to some friends."

He looked behind him at Davis. "Just a friend I hope."

She leaned forward and rested her chin on her hands, elbows on the table. "Don't start acting jealous, Wizard, or you surely will be." She gave him a smile. "I told him I was exclusive to you but I'm not about to stop having male friends. Okay?"

"Alright." His smile looked forced and unconvincing.

Elli listened to him talk about work, downed a couple of drinks. and finally relaxed.

"You feel better now?"

"Yeah."

“You do know I’m not going to run around when you’re not around?”

“I trust you.”

“Good, because if you don’t trust me, then it’s over. I absolutely won’t cheat on you but I can’t stand it if you think I might.”

“I understand. Elli, I believe you.”

“Good, now let’s have a drink to celebrate our understanding. We’re a couple, officially.”

He finished his drink. “Let’s go. I want some alone time with you.”

Elli held his hand as they left the bar. She started in the direction of her apartment but he pushed toward his place instead. It was further away, but it seemed he was being directive. She liked him better when he was acting in control and let him lead her. His apartment was larger than hers was and less cluttered, making it look even bigger.

She took off her boots and coat as he retrieved two drink containers from the kitchen. She followed him to the living room and sat on the couch with him. He put his arm around her and kissed her. Elli leaned into his arm, tilting her head back as he pressed forward.

Elli enjoyed his kisses as he kissed her neck and in a few minutes, they tumbled off the couch. He pulled off her shirt and pressed down on her. Using one hand, he gripped her wrists together and pinned them over her head. She felt his long fingers wrap around her wrists and didn’t struggle to free herself. His other hand slid up her ribs and she sighed.

“Wizard, you are acting rather aggressive. Are you planning to just have your way with me?”

“Are you objecting?”

“Not in the least.”

\* \* \* \*

“Hey, Elli, how are you doing?”

Elli turned and smiled at Jill. “Hi, thanks for meeting me for a drink.”

“Believe me, there wasn’t a lot of arm twisting there.” Jill laughed.

“Good, but thanks for meeting me at the Twisted Lime Pub. I need to talk to someone.”

“What about?” Jill sat next to Elli on a barstool. She ordered a drink and stared at her.

“Wizard. I feel it’s getting complicated.”

“Really? How so?”

“When I first met him I thought I would just have him as a boyfriend for a while and move on. I used to do that a lot.” She gave an embarrassed shrug and smiled. “I had kind of a wild past.”

“I gathered that from our earlier conversations.”

“But Wizard can grow on you, you know? Especially since you and Hank stopped me from getting an easy night on the starship.”

Jill laughed. “We were only protecting you from yourself.”

“Well, I guess I needed that. But Wizard is giving me these bedroom eye looks now. I turned down his offer to live with him and I think his feelings had been hurt because I still went out with other guys. Not so now, more flirting in the bar type of thing.” Elli took a long drink. “But a strange thing happened the other night. Without thinking, I asked him if he wanted kids. I couldn’t believe I asked him that. I mean that’s what you ask when you’re thinking of marrying someone and until that moment I didn’t think I was that serious about him.” She took a drink. “It’s been good since and the other night Wizard suddenly took charge. I mean he was physically in control and it was something I wanted from him. The trouble is I think he’s going to propose to me soon and I don’t know what to say.”

“Do you love him?”

Elli nodded slowly. “I think so.”

“He’s a real decent guy. As far as kids are concerned, you just know he would be a good father. If he loves you, just what is the problem?”

Elli sighed. “I guess I always used to go for guys that were a little rough around the edges.”

“You like the bad boys. Well, sweetheart, so do I. But sometimes you have to make a decision that’s best for you in the long run. If you let Riley go, you may regret it for the rest of your life. Do you really think there’s a better man for you out there?”

“No, I know I’m lucky he loves me despite how I treat him sometimes. I just wish he would do something wild or special and make me feel he’ll do something crazy to get me.”

“Christmas is coming. Maybe he’ll think of something.”

She grinned. “Knowing Wizard it might be wrapped in a weather map.”

## Chapter Eleven

Elli answered the door to Riley. “Okay, just how cold is it outside?” She began to do up the winter coat and looked at him suspiciously. “And why won’t you tell me why we have to go outside in the centre of town on Christmas?”

“It’s a surprise. Trust me, you’ll like it. Think of it as a special Christmas present.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You already have gifts for me. Just how special is this gift?”

“It’s unique.” He gave her grin and escorted her down the hall and out of her apartment.

Elli closed up her coat and pulled the hood over her head. She didn’t mind the cold as much as some others in Red City, though she would be glad when summer returned. Riley had told her next summer would see higher temperatures with higher humidity and greater air pressure. He sounded excited to her when he said there would be actual rainfall next summer. She had giggled at his love for doing weather forecast months into the future.

She stepped out onto the main street, looking around at the coloured lights that had been attached to the outside of buildings. In the centre of an intersection, a green Christmas tree had been put together out of various materials. Elli knew it looked fine until one came too close to it.

Despite the cold, there were people on the streets, heading from one shelter to another. It seemed the strategy of the Martian government to make the town as social as possible was working, drawing people to the entertainment section regardless of the temperature.

Her wristband vibrated as she followed Riley down the street and she glanced at the message. The red lettering indicating an announcement from the Marian Government Council. Usually it was a warning of impeding winds, the time of a general meeting or anything the council deemed important for all citizens. “Attention; there is a special event planned for Red City this evening. If you are able, please join us in the Entertainment Section immediately.”

“Hey, Wizard, do you know anything about this special event?” “Maybe a little.” He grinned.

“Liar. I bet you know what this whole thing is about.” She looked around the area but didn’t see anything special. She noted some dark clouds drifted above her in the sky. As usual, they looked low in the Martian atmosphere. They were darker than usual but so far, none of the clouds had

ever dropped more than a few feeble raindrops. The thirsty air seemed to gobble up any moisture before it reached the ground. She looked at Riley who was checking his hand held pad for information. “What are you checking?”

“Some minor variables. Humidity mostly.”

“It feels as dry as ever.”

“I mean relative humidity. The air is cold and can’t hold moisture right now.” He touched part of the pad and spoke into it. “Okay, it’s a go. Fire away.”

“Fire what?”

Riley just smiled and pointed to the south. “Watch.”

Elli slipped her gloved hand inside his arm. “This better be good after teasing me like this.”

The surrounding crowd turned to look at where he pointed. Elli wasn’t too surprised at the size of the crowd which had grown in numbers in the past few minutes, knowing there wasn’t a lot of other things to do on Mars.

Three small rockets with a blaze of light behind them rose into the sky, simultaneously entering a dark cloud move above them. Elli wondered if they were supposed to be fireworks, but if they were, the effect would be lost in the cloud. Then she heard several “whoops” emanating from the cloud. The noise caused the cloud to change its appearance and for a moment, the cloud looked out of focus. Then as she stared, it began to change its colour, becoming lighter.

Elli felt as puzzled as the others around her except Riley who was looking pleased with the chain of events. She turned her attention back to the cloud and was startled by what she saw. Her childhood became racing back, and she was suspended back to a time when she lived in Alberta. It was a familiar sight that warmed her completely.

She yelled out, “Snow!” She lifted her hands high and danced in a small circle as the first flakes touched her face. The people began cheering and clapping as the snow lazily fell to the ground. A few people broke into singing “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas...”

“This is the best Christmas present ever.” Elli looked around to give Riley a hug and a kiss, but had to look down to find him.

Riley was down on one knee, holding a ring in his hand.

Elli gasped and covered her face with her hands. The crowd diverted their attention from the falling snow to watch his proposal.

“Elli, each of these millions of snowflakes is saying the same thing, that I love you. And I’ll tell you a million times myself—if you want me to, but I love you and want you to marry me.”

The ring glittered as he held it between two fingers. She knew the circle of people around her were waiting for her reaction. Elli felt a tear run down

her cheek, and then another. She leaned forward and fell on top of him. “Yes, yes, yes, you crazy weatherman.” She heard applause as she kissed him.

\* \* \* \*

A year later.

Elli watched the rain fall, increasing the size of the water puddles spread about the flat ancient lake surface. “It looks like Wizard’s lake may actually turn into a lake again.” Elli leaned against Riley inside the transport.

“Maybe sooner than you expect. The ground is thawing underneath and as the lake fills up above, the two will meet and create a large body of water.”

“More climate change information. Wizard, you really know how to talk romance to a girl. Our first anniversary is in two weeks and I hope, for your sake, you’ll be able to increase your area of interest to something I like too.”

Riley laughed. “I will do my best.”

“I know you will. I have a question for you.”

“Sure, whatever you want to know.”

“Over a year ago I asked you what you felt about kids. You didn’t really answer me. I guess now I need an answer. You’re going to be a dad.”

He broke into a grin. “That’s great. When did you find out?”

“Before the tests confirmed it I knew. So... you happy to be a dad? He leaned over and kissed her hard. “Only one kid?”

“There is a possibility for more.”

“That’s good because I sure like the thought of making more of them. Maybe someday we’ll come out here as a family and spend the day at the beach.”

Elli laughed. “That means I’m going to have to find a bathing suit. No more skinny dipping here.”

“No more of the wild girl running naked?”

“I’m a changed woman. You and Mars did that to me. But don’t worry, the wild girl will always be inside me. She’s just a little more responsible now.”

**The End**