

SMUGGLER'S LOVE

Deimos Orbit

Mars Security Zone

Sunday, November 6

Earth Year 2140

Experience provided me a long career. My adventures took me places I couldn't dream of when I was kid. Along the way, I found people; friends, allies, and plenty of enemies. I never expected to find love, love so innocent it broke boundaries. The kind of love poets opine about. I heard once that love is patient, love is blind, love is transcendent—well something like that. All I knew was love got me in a whole lot of trouble.

“Woohoo!”

Never had a single word from a woman filled me with more excitement and terror at the same time.

With hands steadier than a seasoned pilot of hundreds of flights, my girlfriend eased my ship tighter into the slingshot around Deimos. “I can't believe you never let me try this before, Reese. This is amazing!”

My fingers continued their white knuckled grip on my chair. Fighting the increasing forces pressing on me and my wavering resolve; my jaw cocked at a weird angle. “My instructor made all his students do it at the end of their training; a final test before graduation.”

She turned her head. “You mean I can get certified?”

Her lack of concentration drifted our vector, shifting out of the slingshot window and closer to the moon. I stretched out my hand as an alarm chirped on the panel. “Eyes on the controls, Irina!”

She snapped her head forward. To her credit, she didn’t overcorrect. A jerk on the controls would have sent us into a spin and headed toward a certain impact with the moon’s surface. She tweaked the thrusters and our vector corrected. “I’ve got it.”

Our ship rocketed out of Deimos’s shadow, speeding into a high orbit around Mars. I took a deep breath, letting my tension ease. “Nice recovery.”

Irina flashed a smile, her green eyes wide. “Thanks.” She tapped the console. “You did great too, *Gracie Mae*.”

I soaked her in, hardly believing the events that had brought us together. Three months before, I was blackmailed by EDF Security to infiltrate the home base of the Almora Cartel run by Ulinda and Gideon Almora, Irina’s aunt and uncle. My instructions were to assist another undercover operative to disable the base’s defenses and allow Security to barge in. Once inside, I met Irina. Unlike her other family members, who either threatened to tear me to pieces or shoot me, she proved to be a sane alternative and, to my surprise, helped me complete my mission.

When the dust settled, I was arrested along with the Almoras, but Security released me, probably for services rendered, but with those hard asses, it’s difficult to tell. When I got back to my ship, I found Irina had stowed away onboard and we’d been together ever since. Keeping a low profile, we stayed closer to Earth while I taught her the ropes of being a transport pilot. This Mars run was the farthest out we’d travelled.

“Where is this delivery we’re making?” she asked.

“It’s called the Hideaway. My friend Kenton built it ages ago close to the Martian Polar Ice. It’s a secluded station with a strict client list and off Security’s radar.” Kenton Krieg and his longtime assistant, Annie, were two of the best friends a smuggler could have. Easy going, and as long as I didn’t bring trouble, they didn’t ask questions. I scored a room early on in my career and made sure to

visit as often as possible. Friends were hard to make in this life and I valued them like family.

“Secluded, huh,” her voice turned sultry. “Are you planning a romantic getaway?”

I winked. “Maybe.”

“As long as I can get to Mars Station while we’re here, I’m all for it.” Irina’s mother had grown up on the station and Irina still had family there. I promised we would swing by to collect some things her mother had hidden away from her father’s side of the family.

I straightened myself and rubbed my shoulder where my harness had cinched. A white light flashed on the sensor panel and I checked the screen. “Looks like there’s another ship in the area.”

Irina turned. “I didn’t see it before we started.”

“Not to worry. They’re probably headed to the observatory on Deimos. I’ve made supply runs there dozens of times.”

The light on the sensor panel turned red and a harsh klaxon blared.

“Reese, what’s happening?”

I grabbed the controls. “Whoever that is, they just targeted us. Switch over.”

Irina tapped a button, sending primary control back to my station.

“They’re closing, brace yourself!” I slammed the throttle to maximum and vectored toward Mars. The acceleration constricted my chest, but the inertial dampeners kicked in providing a slight respite. “Irina, does the computer have a reading on that ship?”

She studied the sensor readout. “Mitsu-Renault Corsair.” She shook her head. “The transponder is registering. I can’t get an ident.”

I grimaced. Corsairs were sleek transports, but their cargo size was limited. Over the years, retrofitted versions became the ship of choice for mercenary groups—and pirates. “They’re not rolling out the welcome wagon. That ship is closing to weapons range.”

Irina’s face turned to a picture of concern. “Can we outrun them?”

I checked the sensor screen and shook my head. “We can’t make the atmosphere in time.” I pointed to a bank of four switches

under the sensor screen and smiled. “Don’t worry, we’ve still got few tricks left to play. At this range, we can dodge cannons all day, but most of the Corsairs are fitted with a missile launcher. I need you to throw those switches when I tell you.”

She nodded, her hands trembling.

I activated the comm system and switched to the emergency band. “Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is the *Gracie Mae II* on approach vector to Mars from Deimos to any ship in range. We are under attack by pirates. Please respond.”

“This...EDF Sec... Repeat...mission.” A powerful hiss drowned the responder’s voice in the broken reply. I repeated the Mayday call and only the hiss of static returned.

“It’s no use; comms are jammed.” Another light flashed on the sensor panel. “He fired. I’ve got one bogey inbound.” The distance tracking numbers under the approaching missile ran like a waterfall. I counted down in my head. Three...two...one. “Now Irina!”

She flipped the four switches. Three quick bursts vibrated from the rear of the ship followed by a hollow clink as an object detached from the hull. Bright purple light filled the empty space behind us; the plasma flares erupted in their brilliance. The sensor screen dimmed and the lights in the cabin faded to a pale red. I idled the engines, letting our velocity carry us away, and prayed.

Seconds later, the cabin filled with the flash of the missile detonation near the flares, engulfing the decoys with an orange cloud of roiling energy.

I checked the viewport. Our ship continued its path, Mars getting ever closer. Two blips remained on the sensor screen. One angled away and disappeared. The second blip slowed then turned to follow.

“Holy shit!” I screamed.

“It tracked the flares.” Irina gave me a thumbs up. “That’s good, right?”

“Yeah, but we’re not up against pirates.”

“What do you mean? They just tried to shoot us down.”

I shook my head. “No. Pirates are after cargo. They use weapons that will disable engines or vent atmosphere. It might kill