

"Tell you what, Adromo," Katie said thoughtfully, taking another bite of her strawberry Pop-Tart. It was only a little stale. "I'll shave my legs when you shave your balls."

Sergeant Joseph Adromo grimaced. "Gross! I'd have, like, little-boy balls." He scratched his crotch unconsciously, as if already itching from an imaginary shaving. He wouldn't be so itchy, Katie thought, if he didn't wear his under-uniform so tight.

"Exactly." Katie dropped a wink at Lieutenant Maria "Mama" Sanchez, Katie's XO and Adromo's direct supervisor. Sanchez laughed, crumpling up her own Pop-Tart wrapper and throwing it at Adromo.

"All I'm sayin' is, dontchya wanna be a little more, y'know..." he scrunched up his considerable eyebrows, pondering. "Feminine?"

Sergeant Melissa "Rita" Hayworth, stretched out on the flat red dirt across from Sanchez and Katie, stretched and yawned. "He means girly."

"First of all," Katie said firmly, jumping off the hot Martian boulder and dusting off the seat of her uniform, "while I appreciate your gender-specific and wildly culturally outdated concern about my appearance, we barely get enough water ration to brush our teeth, much less shave our legs. Secondly, the offer stands. Shave your balls, I'll forgo brushing my teeth for an entire week so I have enough water to shave my legs."

"But then your teeth would be all scuzzy," Adromo countered.

"Ah, but then I'd be feminine – at least by twentieth-century standards - and that's apparently more important," Katie grinned. She glanced up at the dome of their temporary shelter, erected thirty minutes earlier so they could eat actual food – with their actual mouths, and not through the intake straw of their helmets – and noticed it was beginning to shimmer. "Time to go, folks," she sighed, reaching down for her helmet. "UV's are doing what they do best."

The four of them put their helmets back on, checking each other's connections and oxygen levels. When all were secure, Sanchez flipped the security latch on the dome generator and hit the red button underneath. A warning alarm commenced, and they stood with varying levels of patience as it counted down from thirty. Finally it reach zero, and the dome shimmered brighter for a brief second, then flashed as it dispersed. Hayworth and Adromo rolled up the perimeter tubing and packed it away with the generator while Katie and Sanchez prepped for the second half of their journey.

"Dragon to base," Katie spoke into the roller's dash comm.

"Go ahead, Dragon."

"Recommencing mission two alpha. Departing post marker four-six-nine, heading for Outbase Charlie."

"Copy all, Dragon. Cleared for go. Enjoy the rest of your day."

"Copy, base, Dragon out." She clicked off the comm unit and turned to Sanchez, who was plugging a series of coordinates into their navigation system. Even though Outbase Charlie had stood firm for nearly four Martian solar cycles, they were still required to travel only from post marker to post marker; any deviation had better be a matter of life and death. The post markers wandered across the Martian landscape, marking areas free of hazards to their roller. Hidden gulches and dust-pits had claimed several rollers during the building of Space Force's Mars Base One, and they were taking no chances now.

"Hey, Captain?" Adromo walked up, still tugging at his crotch. Katie turned and grinned.

"You know they make under-uniforms in larger sizes, right?"

He looked down and flushed, though the UV shield over his face hid the worst of it. "Sorry. I just can't get used to free-balling. I miss actual underwear."

"I hear you." Katie herself missed wearing an actual bra; the under-uniform claimed to have a "female support shelf," but it just wasn't the same, and she hated the feel of her sweaty boobs sticking to her chest. She still didn't understand why bras and underwear had been deemed a "medical risk," and suspected HQ Space Force just didn't want to pay the cost of sending undergarments thirty-four million miles.

"Anyway, I just wanted to apologize. Call me old-school, but it's still weird to me..."

"What, working with all women?" Hayworth asked, walking up behind him.

"I guess," he sighed.

"Don't worry." Hayworth slapped him on the shoulder. "Eventually they'll rotate one of us out, and you have a fifteen percent chance of getting a male coworker that falls within Space Force deployment physical standards. It's just too bad for you that men tend to be bigger--"

"And eat more--" Sanchez chimed in.

"And use more oxygen--" Hayworth again.

"And poop more!" Katie's contribution. "Just remember, up here, we're all Martians, and on Mars, there's--"

"No race, no gender, no limits!" They all joined in on the old Space Force recruiting motto, laughing. That motto had survived one terrible commercial before being scrubbed in favor of the current motto; "Space Force; The Sky *Isn't* The Limit."

Cheered, the four strapped into the roller, Captain Katie "Windblown" Yazzie in the driver's seat. She took a brief moment to look around at the landscape, ostensibly making sure nothing had been forgotten but really just....looking. Mars often reminded her of home; even though it really didn't look anything like Shiprock, Arizona, there was just something about it.

Katie sighed, bringing herself back to the task at hand. Her right foot pressed the accelerator and the quantum electric generator beneath their seats thrummed as they set off for post marker four-seven-zero and far beyond it, Outbase Charlie.

End