

The Plus One

by Marie Vibbert

Blaine held her face over the broth after her husband handed it to her, inhaling the scent. Yeasty, and a hint of...

"Dill," Keith settled down next to her on the storage tub they used for a bench. "The plant was just big enough to trim."

"Ooo." Blaine kissed him in the steam over her cup. "My man can COOK." After two months on Mars trying to get anything to grow, after a day spent digging out a faulty drain pipe, this felt like a trip to a luxury spa. She felt her hair and her toes uncurl.

Which of course was when the radio buzzed. "Marshal? Are you there?"

Blaine slumped. She was sitting down for the first time in ten hours.

"You better answer that, Marshal." Keith kissed her cheek and unhooked the receiver from her belt.

With a sigh she pressed the transmit button. "What is it, Control? I'm about to eat dinner."

There was a static wash of sound – an environment suit rubbing against the radio. "Oh, sorry. No rush. We got a dead body for you to look at, that's all."

Blaine raised her eyebrows, lowered the radio and mouthed "No rush" at her husband.

"I suppose it's not an emergency if they're already dead," Keith offered, but that was it, she was off her food, hint of fresh dill or no. "I'll be out the airlock in twenty. Where am I going?"

Keith sighed and stretched. She could see how much he'd been looking forward to their little dinner break, too. She mouthed "Sorry" and went to dig out her environment suit, sipping on the way without tasting.

#

It was a temporary shelter, the kind every habitat dome carried in case of emergency. Really no more than a pressurized pup-tent, you were supposed to put them up inside a leaky dome to keep yourself alive until help came. This one wasn't inside a leaky dome. It was tucked into the edge of a crater, three hundred meters from the dense cluster of structures for Fraxinus Pharmaceuticals, a private-owned research station not officially under US jurisdiction.

Blaine's jurisdiction, technically, began and ended wherever US citizens breathed air. The surface of Mars was international waters, and she had to be careful what she did or didn't do. There was a Chinese settlement nearby, as well as a Brazilian one. It would help to know what nationality of air had once filled this sad little tent.

"I was taking canisters to Fraxinus," the witness said. She was American, slight, swimming inside her size extra small suit, southern accent, no discernable features through her sun-screened faceplate. "Camden" was painted on her breast in the usual place for names. "They refill O2 in exchange for bio waste. Anyway, I noticed the tent, the shine of it, and came over to look."

Camden held open the limp door of the temporary shelter. There was the body, frozen in a fetal position. American environment suit, the helmet still on, probably for warmth, the visor open. Female. Older. Caucasian. Gaunt, though that could be drying... the autopsy would confirm how long she'd been out. The cause of death seemed obvious, but Blaine bent

over the body and shined her light into the gaps between helmet and neck just in case there were wounds or clues. Nothing but the tender curve of flesh, the particular pattern of wrinkles and moles that would never move again. Cracked lips, eyes shut as if in sleep. Blaine peeled open the front of the suit. The name tag said "Milgrim." No tears in the suit. No sign of trauma that she could see. Milgrim had pulled her arms out of the suit-sleeves, curled them against her chest for extra warmth. She had a wedding ring, a strange bit of wealth. The skin around it was burned by the cold transferred from the metal.

Blaine's back was screaming. She eased out of the tent to straighten.

"So, is that it? Can I go?" Camden asked.

There was an official Mars coroner, back in Meridiani Planum, but how would she get the body there? Carry it? Better to bring the analysis here. "I'll radio for an x-ray drone, get as much info as I can on her. Does the name ring a bell? Ever hear of a Milgrim?"

The silence was just long enough to be suspicious. Blaine shone her light on Camden's faceplate. It reflected back, opaque, and Camden threw up a hand to block it. "Yes. I knew her."

"And? Give me something to go on."

"Fraxinus has a softball league. They let all the surrounding domes join so they have enough players. It's not great - I mean we play indoors and... you don't care. Denise was a decent pitcher." She nudged her helmet toward the corpse.

"Did she have enemies? Anyone who would want her out of the picture?"

Camden fidgeted like a kleptomaniac in a jewelry store. Discomfort around a dead body, or fear? Maybe it was only the difficulty of dealing with an over-large suit. "Come on, I mean, accidents happen, right? Maybe she was trying to go camping?"

"So Denise was big into camping?" Blaine put all the sarcasm she could into her voice.

Camden's next words had the heavy slowness of confession. "She said she had enemies. But I don't get involved in that stuff. I just came to play."

"You wish you had gotten involved now?"

"I don't know." Camden stepped backward. "People didn't like her. Can I go? I only have another hour of air in this thing and I left an experiment running."

"I promise, just one more question: do you know what country she's a citizen of?"

Camden flapped her suit arms. "She was a fan of the Detroit Tigers so she pretty much has to be from there, right?"

Good enough, with the suit, to establish reasonable suspicion of citizenship. Blaine could push harder asking questions under her jurisdiction. "Yes, you can go."

Blaine watched Camden shuffle off. She wished she couldn't hear her breath echoing the way it does in a suit, hear the crackle of her radio keeping her connected to the world. She wanted just a moment of silence for Denise Milgrim, in the awful solitude of the Martian afternoon, while she sat and waited for the X-ray drone.

#

Blaine had accepted her job as a US Marshal on Mars knowing that a lot of her reports would be accidental deaths. Oxygen leaked or didn't get transmitted. Experiments went south.

Blaine thought her one year of required service as a warrant officer would prepare her, but there were a lot fewer ways to die in Ohio. Two weeks into Blaine's stay on Mars, a woman killed herself two habitats away. She had cancer and decided that rather than suffer through locally fabricated drugs and remote surgery, she'd turn off her thermal controls and freeze in her sleep. Not all of the accidents on the wild frontier were accidental.

This didn't look the same. The first three Fraxinus officers she called clammed up the moment Blaine named the victim. Who was Denise Milgram to these people?

And then there was her last known residence.

She didn't have one.

"A tragic loss," the public relations woman said, like she was reading a cue card. "If only we could have known she was in such a desperate mental state."

Blaine prickled. Whenever someone volunteers an explanation, it's because they want you not to pick up on a different one. Especially PR people. "But you don't know where she was living?"

"It would be a terrible breach of privacy to keep tabs on non-employees. You understand?"

Blaine understood that wasn't a straight answer. "She had to have had a residence at one time that you know of."

"It's been re-assigned. The current residents will have cleaned or removed any evidence you might be wishing to discover. I am sorry, I do wish I could help you."

Blaine seized on that. "You can help! I'd like to talk to some people who knew her. In person. I'd like to visit the facility. How about tomorrow?"

The silence lasted a beat too long. Blaine could see calculations in how still she held her face before the video camera.

Blaine put on her best “don’t mess with me” face. “I’d hate to think you’d interfere with a legal investigation, given the support your company relies on from the United States Government. I mean, I’d hate it if we stopped trusting you to do your own safety standards reporting.”

Her false-pleasant smile bloomed like a pool of blood. “Of course, officer.”

#

Blaine pulled a late night fussing with the seedling beds in the habitat—they weren’t germinating and it looked like the problem was a lack of heat. She felt guilty leaving Keith alone for as long as it took to walk to Fraxinus, but he was impressed with the way she’d moved everything so the plants were over the compressor coils for the refrigeration unit.

She was sore and tired by the time she got to the compound and had to submit to a long security check-in which wasn’t made any briefer by showing a badge.

She was pissed by the time they shunted her to a cramped tangle of storage that was the medical chief’s workspace.

"No, Denise didn't work for us. Her wife, Suzy Milgrim, was an asset to the corporation. Very bright. But Denise never adjusted." The doctor scrolled and thumbprint-approved documents the entire time she talked. Blaine wondered if she knew or cared what she was signing. "People like that... if an accident doesn't find them, they make one happen."

"You think it was a suicide?"

The doctor shrugged one shoulder. "Denise had mental problems. She thought people were working against her."

Blaine thought turning up dead might be good evidence they were, but instead asked, "Did you report her issues?"

"Why bother? We don't have anyone to treat her, and if we did, she wasn't on the company insurance."

"She was a plus one?"

The doctor nodded. "The company doesn't like reports. The less in text, the better. All I file is whatever will keep us from being sued by some idiot who won't take responsibility for the decision to come to Mars." Thumb print, swipe, thumb print, swipe. Blaine wanted to snatch her tablet and see what these documents were. Was she denying health care to people in front of her eyes? Private corporation settlements set Blaine's teeth on edge.

A "plus one" was sometimes called a "homestead assistant" - staying alive on Mars was more than a full-time job, so it made sense to add spouses to contracts, though they were usually given part-time jobs due to the shortage of people. Still, even "unemployed" homestead assistants were really full-time employed and other companies were willing to count them as employees as far as benefits. That was the deal Blaine's husband Keith had. The government paid a stipend to support all colonists, so the corporation could pay them very little. "I'm confused. If she came in on a partner contract, why doesn't Denise have standing as an employee? Was it a ten-year or one of the new five-year short runs? She should have guaranteed housing for the length of the contract."

"Well, Suzy got sick and she died. The corporation was under no obligation to her widow. The contract ended."

Blaine felt her last ounce of politeness evaporate on the skillet of her rage. "Are you serious?"

The doctor finally turned her full attention on Blaine. "Why should we pay food and shelter for someone who's only here to help someone already dead? The job she was paid for vanished."

"You're telling me you all kicked her out? On Mars?"

"She was given enough air to reach the US Consulate. What do you want us to have done? She wasn't earning her keep."

And Blaine had thought not being able to solve mysteries would be the hard part of her job. "Thank you, doctor," she got up and walked numbly away.

#

Blaine accidentally-on-purpose turned the wrong way out of the medical wing. She'd checked the public plans and knew the employee barracks were to the left. She could smell the wet rot of a cafeteria, and there were more people walking to and fro. The corridor had the same shambled together look most Mars habitats had, but there was definitely something corporate about how blandly it was shambled. Where had they found quite so much grey and white tile on Mars?

Some of the rooms had curtains or silver-foiled cardboard to block them, but most were simply open. The people inside stared at her. Blaine patted her afro.

A reedy-necked man in the same coveralls they all wore popped out of his door as she passed. "You're the marshal." It wasn't a question.

"I'm legally allowed to be here," Blaine said, which was, perhaps, a touch defensive.

The man, his upper lip sported a flecking of hair like a freshly-planted garden, took her hand in both of his, "Denise was a good person. She didn't deserve to go that way. She hated the cold."

"Did she have any enemies?" Blaine hated how automatic her questioning came, when what she wanted to do was hug this man for his expression of human empathy.

"She had a lot of problems. She was sad a lot of the time. Most people... they don't know how to deal with that."

"But you did?"

He shrugged. "I tried to. Be a friend, I mean. When Suzy got sick... it was so hard on her. She lashed out. I knew she didn't mean it."

"They continued to live here, during the illness? Where were they quartered?"

He led Blaine down the corridor and pointed into a room with two beds and a chest. A woman on one of the beds looked up from a tablet and turned so her back was to the door.

He tugged Blaine out of the doorway and lowered his face to her ear. "When Suzy moved to medical permanently ... they kicked Denise out like nothing. She came back, a few times. Security didn't like it, and Denise, she got violent."

"You couldn't let her stay with you? As a guest?"

He looked like Blaine hit him in the face. "... I never thought of that. We're not really... it's not private housing, you know, we have all these rules against sleeping over."

As if summoned by the word “rules” two stout women in the dark blue uniform of private security pushed their way through the crowd. “Ma’am,” one nodded, “You appear lost.”

“Oh, I’m fine,” Blaine said.

The thin boy with the reedy neck started to say something, changed his mind, and ran for it.

She started after him and felt a firm grip on her arm. “Do you have a warrant, marshal, to be in this private residential space?”

Blaine sagged. He was gone from sight, and she hadn’t gotten his name.

#

The US Consulate had a record of Denise Milgrim showing up at their dome and seeking return to Earth, having lost her living on Mars. They turned her down.

The underling who was forced to represent the consulate's position looked at Blaine like she feared she was going to be arrested. She was another waif of a woman. Popular hires because they weigh less for transport.

"It's not that we didn't want to help! Of course we did, but we didn't have a ship going out for a while, and we couldn't put her up for nine whole months. There's no provision for it. One month, we can do, but it was too long. Most people know to time these things for when the ship is due!"

Blaine deadpanned, “So most people time the loss of their spouse?”

“You know what I mean. They have a person to stay with, or they sign a temporary work contract. There are ways. She could have done something.”

What price a human life? Blaine tried to keep her tone calm. "There are laws. The rescue law. We're all required to do everything in our power to save a life in international space, and that includes every inch of uninhabitable surface."

The consulate official cringed. "She wasn't in immediate danger. We gave her a temporary shelter and sent her back to Fraxinus to wait."

"She died in that temporary shelter, when it ran out of heat."

"There's no need to take that tone. It was in perfect working condition when we gave it to her, and we told her how long it would last."

"Would you be keen to defend that decision if it were you receiving the temporary shelter? If it were your sister?"

The petite woman stiffened to her full height. "I wouldn't have gotten myself into that situation."

Blaine knew a brick wall when she walked into one. She thanked the woman for her time.

#

She met her husband in the Ling's habitat next-door. (Next-door being a bit of a joke on Mars, they were a thirty-minute walk away.) The Lings had a bigger place, two couples raising a species of guinea pig that was supposed to be the next big food source on Mars. The cute rodents leant the dome a homey air and zoo-like smell.

Once a week, Blaine and Keith came over to play Spades, share any unusual flavors they had, and feel like they were part of a community. Eating anything that wasn't soy was amazing on Mars. A grain of pepper could bring people from a hundred miles away.

Lan Ling was a biologist working on a NASA grant, as was her wife and her sister, whose husband was a structural engineer. The four of them were killer Spades players, and had successfully grown a red pepper plant, so they could chop up a pepper with a pot of rice and it made Blaine feel unworthy that all she and Keith brought was a pot of dill broth, even when dill was so fragile, so tremulous and precious.

Still, she had to share her work complaints, too. "The corp says they didn't have to let her in because she wasn't in immediate danger and she should have walked back to the consulate. The consulate didn't let her in because she wasn't in immediate danger... it's absurd!"

Chang Ling threw down a ten of spades, taking the trick, and asked, "If it was Fraxinus, do you even have jurisdiction? I thought the corps were sorta separate."

"They are US citizens. They are subject to our laws." Blaine sulkily threw a low card. "I'm just not sure who I can charge with what."

Lan shrugged. "It's not like she was murdered. She froze to death."

"She didn't have to die. There were lots of people who could have taken her in, and chose not to. They chose to let her freeze. Shouldn't that be culpable? Guys, what am I doing here if I'm not investigating?" The group stared at her, fingers on cards.

"Losing four tricks in a row?" Chang offered.

Blaine dug her fingers through her hair.

Keith started the next round with the queen of hearts. "Don't blame yourself. It's not your job to solve every problem on Mars."

Even her husband wasn't taking seriously. Blaine wondered where all the things that were no one's problems went. Where the people who were no one's problem went. She dropped her cards. "I'm going to bed."

#

In the morning, Blaine filed a report citing all the people who had an opportunity to stop Denise from freezing to death and didn't, charging them with negligence under the rescue law. The penalty was a fine to be paid to the heirs of the deceased, plus paying for her burial.

Keith hugged her. "That sounds like the right choice."

"It doesn't feel right enough. The corporation and consulate can pay the fines and the people who did this, who chose to let a woman freeze to death, they won't know they were wrong."

"I think you're not giving people enough credit. They probably all feel horrible."

Blaine wished she was as good-hearted as Keith. She let him lead the way into their greenhouse for the day's work. "They'd better feel at least as horrible as I do."

#

Blaine expected she'd keep brooding over the case, even though it was, in a sense, closed. She didn't expect to get a summons to the main office about it. Immediate, in-person. That meant leaving Keith for a full day, as the rover drove. Was there a lead she missed? Was it actually a murder? She was furious they wanted to talk in person. She had to chew on it all the way to Meridiani Planum. The government seat didn't look any more impressive than any cluster of habitat domes, but someone had put quick-crete columns up in front of the Federal

Dome. Honestly, Blaine liked it. All federal buildings should have an airlock and hydroponics growing in the corridors.

The duty desk didn't say anything, just ushered her back to the director's office. "What's so secret you couldn't video me?"

The director frowned down at her from an unreasonably large quick-crete desk. "I need you to drop this. Fraxinus is very unhappy."

Blaine's jaw dropped. "I'm unhappy. By international law, they have to provide shelter for anyone."

"You don't enforce international law. You're a US Marshall. Unless you don't want to be one anymore."

Her head spun. A threat against her job? For levying a fine? "So who is responsible for Denise's death?"

"Denise." He shrugged. "She came here. She didn't secure herself a job. That's on her. She was a grown woman." He leaned forward. "Are we clear? Case closed."

Blaine felt her jaw creak with how hard she was clenching it. Like a person could conduct a job hunt from a temporary shelter with limited oxygen, and all the commercial sites so far apart? Was Denise supposed to walk around the planet? "You're going to close my case because a corp doesn't want to pay its fine? What did the consulate say?"

"I don't care, and you shouldn't either. The charges are dropped. We're not putting anything official in the system, and I need you to retract your report."

"What about the precedent this sets?"

He didn't move, waiting, chin down, for her to give in.

#

Who was responsible if a woman came to Mars and ended up unable to pay for room and board? Blaine stared at her own little habitat, the fragile bubble of livable space she and Keith had wrestled with blood and sweat from the cold, unforgiving rock, and couldn't answer.

Keith rolled over on the mattress and squinted up at her. "You're back."

She sat down on the edge, feeling the inflated mattress sag too low like always, her husband's bulk falling toward her. "I lost my job."

Keith sat straight up. "You what?"

"Ok, suspended." Blaine heaved a sigh. So very fragile, her life, her dependence on her supervisor - the sell out. "We'll have to get by on just the government stipend the rest of the month, so I can 'cool my head' or whatever." Keith was staring at her in complete, understandable non-belief. "Fraxinus demanded the charges be dropped. I refused. So now I'm out and the charges are dropped anyway. Some bullshit, huh?"

Keith wrapped his strong, sleep-warm arms around her. "Standing up for your principles isn't bullshit."

"It is when all it does is get me punished. What if something breaks this month?"

He kissed the side of her face. "We'll take care of it. If you'd backed down, you'd be just as upset at yourself for that."

Blaine let herself lean into him. "Baby, I need you to be wrong once in a while so I can complain about you the way other wives do."

"We're getting through this. I'll find work. The agri-dome is always hiring. You can be the plus one for a while. Now why don't you unkink these shoulders and get in this bed? You need your rest."

Blaine groaned. "Because I'm still mad. And I feel helpless."

Keith stopped rubbing her shoulders and leaned back. "What could you possibly do?"

"I don't know! There isn't anything I can do. Not with my job depending on my not doing anything against Fraxinus... and the government representation here is... so not."

"Exactly. It's not like you could start a homeless shelter."

Blaine straightened.

Keith said, "We do not have room in here."

"Not here." Blaine slapped him gently. He ran his hand up her arm. She unfastened her coverall. "No. I'll talk to the Langs, and the other families on my usual rounds. We'll put together a collection..." she wriggled out of her top and turned to kiss Keith. "Planning makes me excited."

"You still need to sleep."

Blaine pouted and snuggled up closer. "What we need is a sustainable habitat, that can be powered up on demand, with enough supply to last the longest time between ships going to Earth."

Keith lay back, shaking his head in dismay, but he was smiling. "You are not going to sleep."

"And neither are you." She kissed his nose.

They did, eventually, sleep.

#

Blaine was tending the greenhouse when the Director called. Blaine brushed the dirt off her hands and answered, bringing up the video of him at his unreasonably large desk.

"The Denise Milgram Emergency Hospitality Center?" He asked, eyebrows almost to his hairline. "Really?"

Blaine had a ready answer to that. "Lan Ling is the lead on that project. I'm not part of it."

"Bullshit. You are the only one who would pick that fucking name."

"She wasn't a popular woman in life, doesn't mean she can't be in death." Blaine shrugged. "I hear even Fraxinus is donating to the fund. Kinda spineless of them to do the right thing now, but I wouldn't turn down their money, I mean, if it were me."

"I should fire you."

"Should you? I'm still the only marshal for something like three hundred million kilometers. You sure you wanna drop me and wait for a new one?" She gave him a rueful smile. "If you do, I have a place I can go."

She knew she won when his face darkened and he closed the connection.