

Our Aussie Neighbors

Gayle had been waiting in the lobby at *Earth Elevator Trinity* for about an hour, watching the few people who traveled beyond Earth leave and arrive back home. A couple of other people had been parked in the waiting area like her, sleeping or looking very bored. The black, tightly packed leather chairs available for lounging were arranged in a circle, the only other structure in the room being a drinking fountain and a candy machine. Most of her time had been spent thinking about the trial, wondering about its outcome, and thinking about Cooper.

He was to meet her here so that they could travel to Australia to meet the men who wanted transport to Mars. Cooper had spoken to someone in the group of five that were coming. Supposedly, they would have a small amount of cargo with them, and lots of money to pay. Gayle asked what the cargo was, but they told Cooper they would have to wait until the meeting to find out. Being the impatient businesswoman that she was, Gayle didn't like that, but she could live with it. She was currently more concerned with seeing Cooper.

After being separated from him and the rest of the ship for almost two weeks, Gayle realized how much she missed them all. They really were building a family out of their relationship, much more intense than if they worked an eight to five job together. Even with that bond, she was beginning to think that her feelings for her new security chief ran deeper.

An electronic blast of air sounded the elevator's arrival on terra firma, followed shortly by the opening of two oversized door panels. Two strangers straggled out, and Gayle wondered briefly if Cooper stood her up. Then his full body filled the opening and a wave of butterflies invaded her stomach. An unbreakable smile overtook Gayle's face and she wanted to run up to the man and kiss him right there in front of everyone.

Grinning himself, Cooper lifted his hand to greet her, a packed duffle bag hanging casually over his other shoulder. Gayle, shocked by her own reaction, fought to internally right herself, fearful that she would act a fool in front of this man whose respect she didn't want to lose.

"How was the trip?" she said as he neared.

He shrugged and wagged his hand. "Bumpy as usual. Made it, though. You get your business done?" he asked. Cooper stopped a couple of feet away from her.

"I did all I could do. It's almost over," she said. She felt awkward standing so close to him, wanting to take him in her arms, yet fearing that leap. Their recent friendship had been the only comfort she'd had for some time.

"Good," Cooper said, nodding. A drawn out silence settled over them. The large man looked into her eyes as they said nothing, a mischievous grin spreading over his face.

Gayle let the smile infect her heart, and she stepped forward and threw her arms around his neck, burying her face in his shoulder. When his arms encircled her back, she whispered, "I missed you."

He didn't say anything, other than to return her hug whole heartedly. All the awkwardness she had felt was gone, replaced by a sure, calm feeling she thought she could get used to having. After another moment she pulled away and motioned her head toward the door. "We've got a plane to catch."

Cooper didn't move immediately. "Where's Fifty?"

"He's with my mom for a few days. She's sending him to the ship tomorrow. How is it going up there?"

He smiled and began walking toward the door, towing her along. "Still flying. Norman wasn't happy to be left behind," he said.

Gayle laughed, knowing her Captain and imagining the condemning look he likely gave Cooper as he left to meet her. "He never is."



Norman hated running on a treadmill. All his life, it seemed, he had run hundreds of miles, but never gone anywhere. One of the unfortunate ramifications of living on a spaceship was that he had to do a lot of exercise to keep his muscles Earth-worthy, yet the only way to do it was in some cramped up contraption or another. The total body stimulator would work his muscles for him if he chose, but he preferred to have some control over what he was doing and how hard he pushed himself. So the treadmill was his best option, running forever without progressing a foot. At times like this, he longed for a grueling jog through a steamy, dark forest.

Any of his exercise options always left him with too much time to think. He should have been thinking about the burning pain in his lungs or the radiating tightness in his legs. Instead, he was still fuming about being stuck on the ship lugging cargo while Cooper and Gayle were down on Earth doing something dangerous. When he'd signed on for this job, he knew he'd be responsible for the business end of the cargo transport. That was before they started participating in covert operations, though.

The doors to the efficiently built gym, barely bigger than the Flight Deck, opened and Alexa came through. She was dressed in skin tight black shorts and a matching silky tank top. Miles of untainted pale skin at her stomach, back, and legs was exposed. Her medium length chestnut hair was tightly constricted into a ponytail, tied with a red bow. Seeing her prim and proper most of the time, Norman sometimes forgot that she was a tall, stunning woman. He couldn't ignore that fact now.

Alexa surveyed the equipment, smiling at him when their eyes met. She decided on the treadmill and climbed up next to him, pressing the buttons to start the machine.

"Hi, Captain," she said, walking at an increasing pace on the thick black belt.

"Hey. You feel the need to stretch your legs too, I see."

"We don't have much choice, do we?" she asked.

With a body as shapely as hers, her lack of enthusiasm for exercise surprised Norman a little. "I suppose not. Sometimes it's a good stress reliever, though."

She nodded, but her smile was gone and he could tell she had something on her mind. "I could use that."

"Me too," he said, increasing his running speed a click. "Gayle and Cooper have left me behind while they're out having fun and getting business. It sucks." He put a pout on his face that was only partly for effect.

The woman chuckled. "Someone has to mind the store. You should feel honored that Gayle has that much faith in you," Alexa said. As she began picking up the pace slightly, her eyes stayed locked ahead.

Norman shrugged. "I suppose you're right. That doesn't mean I can't feel like somebody's annoying little brother, though."

"Gayle doesn't see you like that," she said, laughing. Alexa was beginning to go fast enough that talking made her breathing labored.

"How does she think of me?" Norman asked. He wanted to know, and then he didn't want to know.

Alexa kept running for a few moments, and Norman thought she was debating what to say. "She thinks of you as the captain of this ship, which is very important to her. And as a friend. Beyond that, I can't say."

The Captain's brain told him to shut up, but he couldn't. "Can you speculate about how she feels 'beyond that?'" he asked.

Thinking lines creased the brunette's forehead and sweat ran down the sides of her face. "I don't know, Norman. She likes you, but I'm not sure if she *likes* you."

"Are you being kind to me or loyal to her?"

A soft grin returned to her lips. "Both."

"Women." Norman turned back forward and notched the machine up to a higher level.

They both completed the rest of their workout without talk. Norman concentrated on the burning in his lungs and muscles, managing to contemplate that and nothing else. He wished the sensation could last longer. When it ended, he stepped off the treadmill and worked on catching his breath until Alexa was done.

She stepped off the machine and pulled her towel from the rack, wiping her face and neck. A trail of perspiration ran down from her face, making a long track into the inviting valley between her breasts. Norman blinked a few times and pulled his eyes away from the area.

"What are you doing for dinner tonight?" he asked, almost as surprised at himself as Alexa appeared to be.

"I—I don't know," she stammered.

Norman casually shrugged off her indecision with a twist of his hand. "If you're doing something with Zora tonight, I understand. I just thought—"

"No, I'm not doing anything with her," Alexa said quickly. "I don't have any other plans."

"Good. Would you like to get together?"

Alexa nodded cautiously, a smile breaking across her face. "That sounds nice."



After flying faster than fifteen hundred miles per hour on the airplane that brought them to Australia, the speed of the jet train felt like crawling. Despite the difference in velocity, they would be across the outback in a short time to meet with their contact. If all went as planned, their trip to Mars would be underway within two days.

Gayle looked over to Cooper, who sat beside her staring at the images blurring past them through the window. "What do you think this guy is going to be like?" she asked.

Cooper turned to her, his caramel apple eyes searching. "Probably a person like any other."

"I don't think their business is like any others. I have a weird feeling about it."

The big man crossed his arms on his chest and thought for a moment. "You don't know how it is with us less reputable types. There's good and bad among thieves too. Just have to wait and see what these are like."

His attitude scared her. Cooper seemed to accept the thought of doing business with criminals as normal. Given his past, she knew she shouldn't be surprised. He had probably dealt with people who bent and broke the law everyday. The only criminals she had contact with were those who hid it so well that no one would ever find out, or people who conveniently disappeared when trouble came. The idea of hooking up with a common thug for a business deal, or a trained killer of some sort, filled her with apprehension.

"I guess I've been hoping that it would turn out that Devorak Peterson had been crazy and all this artifact business was a figment of his imagination," she said.

"Probably not true. Could be, but the chances are against it," he said. "Something untoward is definitely going on around here."

She nodded, knowing he was right, wishing he wasn't. Her business venture was turning into much more than she had anticipated when she and Rick were drawing up the plans. He would probably be mortified to know in what she was becoming involved.

After arriving in Dowdy, an employee at the train station gave them general directions to the area of town they needed to visit. The town, which had emerged from vacant tundra after Australia's United States benefactors installed the high speed rail, branched out like a wagon wheel from the hub. The quality of neighborhood declined significantly further away from the depot. Consequently, Cooper and Gayle had a bit of distance to walk.

The vehicle poor streets were instead filled with people, some sections full enough to support a bazaar, had anyone been smart, or brave enough to open one. The squalor surprised Gayle, who's liberal heart believed that there was no excuse in their age of amazing technology for anyone to live in hunger or depredation. Yet all around her, she saw signs of humans struggling for their next meal, and not knowing where they might lay their heads for the night.

For all of her life, Australia had been the red headed step child of the countries the United States had conquered over the last three hundred years. They'd had no choice but to assimilate, as most other nations had chosen to do. In recent years, though, Australians had begun to show signs of dissent. Gayle supposed that the people they were meeting today were an outshoot of the same movement. As a result of pockets of resistance in this once unpopulated region, the country had been purposefully neglected and allowed to live without the benefits government could provide.

When they finally came to the apartment at the far edge of town, Gayle wondered if there would be running water inside. Only scattered flakes of paint remained on the outer siding, leaving ugly, weathered bare patches beneath. The strips of wood that had surrounded the front door were broken or missing, making the entrance look like a hungry, gaping maw. The building was two stories tall and looked to have four living units

inside. With the apparent condition, Gayle hoped they didn't have to go up to the second floor.

Gayle allowed Cooper to take the lead into the building. His stern expression and rough exterior seemed to have an effect on the person who met them in the foyer. They were escorted to the apartment they needed quickly, then the little man scurried off. Cooper rapped on the door and told the person behind it that they were there.

A pigeon faced man opened the door a few inches and peered at them, then looked around to verify that they were alone. Satisfied, he opened the door all the way and motioned them to enter. When Gayle's eyes adjusted to the light, she was surprised to see a bank of computers along one wall, surrounded by other electronic equipment she didn't recognize. Though these men might have lived in a slum, they were obviously much more sophisticated than most of their neighbors.

"We need transport to Mars," the pigeon faced man said. His small, dark eyes concentrated on Gayle with an intensity she found disturbing. The man, wearing all black, made her uncomfortable, though she couldn't pinpoint why.

Gayle put her hand out. "Hi. I'm Gayle Darwin. This is Cooper Gray. You are?" She didn't like the clandestine feeling the entire situation gave her.

The man, who appeared to be about fifty and almost anorexic, smiled. "My apologies," he said, his Aussie accent thicker than most. "I'm Ulrich St. James. I see you made it to us in safety."

After Ulrich took Gayle's hand, he shook Cooper's. "No complaints," the security chief said.

"Good. Now if you don't mind dispensing with any other pleasantries, our time is limited." Ulrich motioned over his shoulder to his rebel companions working at the computer terminals. "We need a transport to Mars for five people and a few boxes of cargo."

"What is the cargo?" Gayle asked.

The rebel shook his head slowly. "There is no reason to put on facades, Ms. Darwin. Part of the price you will pay for providing transport to us will be that you are not privy to all of our business. There are many who would do us, and you, harm to get what we carry." He gave a spooky smile and

shrugged his shoulders. "The price we will pay to obtain your services, however, will be appropriately handsome."

Cooper, chest puffed and putting on a good impression of a tough guy, held up a hand. "We have to know something about what you want to carry so that we can be assured it doesn't put the ship in danger."

"There will be no danger to the ship from my cargo," Ulrich said, waving a hand as if to dismiss a ridiculous idea. "It is simply—equipment."

"Why are you doing business with us? We both know that you are wanted by the government. How do you know we won't turn you in? There's probably a reward," Gayle said. Cooper gave her a stern look in response.

Squinting his pigeon eyes, the rebel's face twitched into a disturbing smile. "I know of you through my associate, Mr. Peterson. He seemed to learn a lot about you. He thinks you can be trusted."

Gayle couldn't believe he was relying on the word of their former passenger. "How can you even admit that you know that murderer, much less take his advice?" she asked, outraged.

"Ms. Darwin, you have many lessons to learn. Perhaps the first one must be that killing is a part of war that no one can avoid. Mr. Peterson did what he was selected to do."

"So we're expendable too if we come in conflict with your cause?" Cooper asked.

The thin, jaded man shook his head. "We're all expendable, Mr. Gray, regardless of the cause." He turned back to Gayle and focused on her. "We are not basing our decision to use your company only because of Mr. Peterson. You have a well known reputation on Earth for being an enemy of the government." He held out both hands as if singing in a choir. "We all know that the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Gayle shifted toward him and held up a warning hand. "Hold on here. I'm not an enemy of the government. I don't always like what they do, but I respect my country and its leaders."

Walking over to stand closer to the nearest computer operator, Ulrich shook his head. "You are either with the government or against them. The time is coming when we will all have to take a stand."

Zealots weren't the kind of people she had planned on doing business with when she started this venture. Gayle knew, however, that her path was already set. She just hoped that she had made the right choice.

"Okay, enough talk. I'm going to trust you at this point and hope you don't give me any reason to regret that decision. Do you want us to carry the cargo and passengers or not?"

Ulrich studied her warily for a moment. "Yes, we will use your service. Know that if we are caught on your ship, it will not matter which side of the line you are on. We will all end up in the American graveyard."



One of the good points of being on a slow orbit around Earth was having access to all the bountiful supplies of the planet at short notice. Unlike during a Mars trip, they didn't have to worry about rationing. Everyone could splurge a little now and then, or always when they were close to home. Alexa supposed that was why they were having tender, luscious, and juicy top steaks tonight for dinner. With the crew down in numbers due to Earth visits, she guessed the expense wasn't that great. It also probably pleased the cook to prepare an unusually fancy meal.

Whatever the reason, Alexa was glad for it. The meat melted in her mouth with each bite and filled her with a rough, tart sensation. Norman, who was sitting next to her at their large round table, also seemed to be enjoying the meal. In between their conversation, he was wolfing down his portion at speeds that could hardly allow him to taste the quality meat.

"Gayle is probably gonna have a fit when she learns we had food like this while she was gone," Norman said.

Alexa took a sip of wine and placed her glass back down beside her plate. "I don't know. She probably won't mind because she's probably down there having rock lobster or something."

"I don't think she likes seafood," Norman said. He then grew quiet, staring at nothing across the room, not seeing the other diners in the cafeteria.

Alexa understood the feeling. She moved her remaining chunks of food around her plate with a fork. "I think you're right. I never could get her to eat Sushi."

"I'm in love with her," he said, an apology in his voice.

The brunette reached across the table and took his hand. "I'm sorry, Norman. Have you ever told her?"

He laughed, tossing his head to the side. "No. I've tried to get her to go on a date or otherwise spend time with me, though. I figured starting small was best. She's just not interested."

"To be fair to Gayle, she's been under a lot of stress since you two started working together. I'm sure it doesn't have anything to do with you," Alexa said. She and Gayle didn't talk much about the business woman's love life, but she was pretty sure that she didn't have romantic feelings for Norman.

"She's not under too much stress to chase Cooper like a school girl," he said, his voice bitter. Norman picked up his half-full glass of wine and downed it all.

"I don't think she's chasing him," she said.

The Captain's face crinkled in a look of disbelief. "Then you're not paying attention. I know her well enough to know that she's falling for him."

Alexa could only shrug. "Maybe."

"So what's wrong with me?" he asked.

"Nothing. You're handsome, smart, and strong. Any woman would be lucky to have you." She squeezed his hand again and he returned the embrace. "You're also smart enough to know that sometimes two people just don't click that way."

He sighed explosively. "I guess."

Alexa, reminded of her own problems, expelled a weary breath of her own. "I wonder if that's the case with me and Zora, or if I'm just too much of a chicken shit to acknowledge my feelings."

"Maybe you just feel guilty because you don't feel that way about her," he offered.

"Maybe," she said again, wishing she knew the answer.

Norman stood from the table, keeping her hand in his. He didn't say anything, but they began walking toward the crew housing section. Alexa had no illusions about where the night could go if she let it. Whether she wanted to head in that direction was a more mysterious question. Norman had made her feel good, or at least better, for a little while. Letting that pattern continue for a few hours more wouldn't be such a bad thing.

The stark gray halls of the *Gossamer* were empty save them. The overhead lights were as bright as day, and an almost imperceptible breeze into their faces. Still, the ship felt like the loneliest place in the universe. Alexa was sure that she probably needed a hard slap to wake her up and snap her out of the perpetual funk in which she seemed to be.

The Captain's larger quarters were down at the end of the hall. They came to her door first, stopping in front of it and looking at each other. Norman's blue eyes were crystal clear and the smile on his face left no question of what he wanted. Alexa thought about the way she felt at this moment, and briefly about the consequences. Her decision wasn't hard.

"Do you want to come in?" she asked.

"Sure," he said, motioning for her to go first.

Alexa walked the small distance to her bed and stood in front of it. Norman moved into the room enough to let the door slide shut behind him. The silence pushed against the walls as they stared at each other.

"You know, you might have a chance with Gayle yet, if you give her some time. You're not such a bad guy," she said.

Norman furrowed his eyebrows and smiled. "Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"Yes," Alexa grunted. "I'm not very good at this part of it."

His smile widened and Alexa knew exactly why women found him sexy. "As long as you're good at the next part, it doesn't matter," he said. Norman put up a hand to stop her when she started to speak. "Sometimes it's good to forget, right? Forget everything."

She nodded, feeling butterflies in her stomach as he took steps to her. He stopped with their bodies within an inch of each other and she put her

arm around his neck, bringing them face to face. A hot desire rising in her, Alexa made the first move forward, forcing their bodies and lips together. His intense need only spurred hers as they kissed timelessly.

Without realizing when, they had slipped down onto the bed, and Alexa pulled away to put a short distance between them. Norman looked at her, his blue eyes now flames, his lips wet with their activity. There was a hurt look on his face that she wasn't sure she could make go away.

"You're not going to regret this tomorrow, are you?" he asked softly.

She smiled and brushed the hair from his forehead. "No. As long as you don't either. Let's just close our eyes and pretend the world is the way we want it to be. Forget everything."

He surged forward again and she met him in a kiss to remember.



Gayle and Cooper leaned side by side against the giant trunk of an oak tree standing proud in front of *Earth Elevator Dos*, waiting for their new comrades to arrive with their cargo. She and Cooper had traveled from Australia alone for security purposes, and because the Gate Keepers had some business to which to attend. She had a feeling that she didn't want to know what that business was, so she hadn't asked.

In the meantime, she'd been trapped in close quarters with Cooper, and she'd loved every moment of it. Having someone to be close to was fun, even if it scared the hell out of her if she thought about it. She'd never really had much of that intimate, constant friendship with Rick given his obligations to the government and his family. Hanging out with Cooper and seeing him as her best friend was a nice change.

"You'd think after they give us a big speech about how we're gonna die if we help them, they'd at least be on time to get started," Gayle said, leaning closer to her security chief.

"Maybe they're not as happy to sacrifice themselves for the cause as they seemed," he said.

Gayle smiled. "Maybe." She turned toward him, her shoulder touching his as the tree held them up. "Do you think of the government as murderers?"

Cooper's countenance scrunched and he looked displeased with the serious question. "Don't know. I think that we're a lot less of a democracy than we pretend to be. Politicians do what they want."

"If that's true," she asked, "who is the dictator?"

He shrugged. "Figure you'd have more insight than me. Not the president?"

"I don't think so. He's elected and has to leave office every eight years whether he wants to or not. There are some senators who have been there a while, but I don't think any of them are running the country." She sighed powerfully. "They will use their power to serve their needs as much as the next man, but I don't think any of them are together enough."

"Must be a group outside of the government, or someone not elected."

Gayle hated speculating on what had happened to the government she once loved. There were some good men and women in power, but they seemed so few and far between. "I don't know. Just about all the cabinet is replaced regularly. Besides, it seems we would hear rumors of it. It's just like there is this whole secret government that no one knows about, but it's creating death and chaos everywhere we look."

"Don't know," he said, flexing his shoulder to bump her. "You're just a bundle of fun, you know it?"

She smiled again, pushing those more depressing thoughts from her mind. "That's what Norman says. He thinks I have no sense of humor."

Cooper made a "hmmm" noise, dipping his chin in acknowledgment. "Norman's jealous."

"Of what?"

Cooper spread his hands between them. "Us."

Gayle felt a little lost, and a little like she had just started down a monster drop on a roller coaster. "There's an *us*?"

He bent forward and she could feel his breath against her ear. "Could be, if you want there to be."

“I think you know—“

Gayle was interrupted mid-sentence by the screech of tires on pavement as a late model passenger van jolted to a stop at the curb in front of them. She recognized Ulrich sitting in the front passenger seat. He appeared to be shouting orders to the men around him, who were beginning to scramble even before the vehicle came to a complete stop.

Ulrich, his pigeon face now pinched in panic, burst from the van and sprinted toward them. “We need to get in as fast as possible. We may have been followed.”

“May have been?” Cooper asked, his voice raised in alarm.

“No time to explain. Just get into the elevator and we’ll be right in,” Ulrich ordered.

Gayle wanted to protest, to tell this man that he was a customer, not a commander, but she had little doubt that they were truly at risk. Cooper put a hand on her arm and they began walking toward the elevator.

They didn’t hear a second car arrive, but the sound of blast fire let them know that their unwanted friends had arrived. Gayle briefly worried about whether or not anyone could currently connect her to the Gate Keepers. She didn’t have time to think about it for long. Sprinting at full speed, Cooper dragged her toward the doors, which would either turn out to be paradise, or a trap.

Running through the lobby, Gayle noted that there was no one else around for the next transport. She was glad no other people would be put in harm’s way. Cooper pushed her into the heart of the elevator car as he stopped to talk to the operator. With her own heart beating in her ears like snare drums, she couldn’t understand what he was saying. She thought he told the man to hold the door open until Cooper said, or people started shooting at him.

She crouched behind several cargo crates stacked near the front of the car and watched, pleased when Cooper joined her. A moment later, the five Gate Keepers appeared in front of them, each firing a gun toward the parking lot and carrying a large black case. Their attackers were not in the picture, and she suspected, not as many in number as when they’d shown up.

Blood splattered like a fountain from one of the men and he fell where he stood, a section of his head missing as if it were an incomplete jigsaw puzzle. Gayle felt her stomach lurch painfully, twisting the knots that were already grinding away. Cooper yelled at the elevator operator to close the door, and he reached a hand up over his control board without exposing any of his vital parts.

As the doors began to pull together, the Gate Keepers fell back into the elevator car. Ulrich pocketed his gun and picked up the dead man's suitcase, leaving his body behind as he escaped. Blast fire scorched the doors even as they sealed and the elevator began its ascent.

"What the hell was that?" Gayle yelled, advancing on Ulrich.

"An assassination attempt," he said, his voice calm, though interrupted by ragged breath.

Gayle thought she might vomit. Cooper walked up from behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't think they had time to make you and I, so there should be no connection between the Gossamer and the group."

"I hope they think you're dead," Gayle spat. "If not, they'll track them to us."

Ulrich's face transformed with rage and his dark eyes turned stony to her. "I just lost a good man and I think I've been shot, so you may get your wish. Either way, it's too late for you to turn back now. I told you our mission was risky." He raised a hand to his right upper chest and pressed against the cloth, forcing a sludge of blood to surge around his hand.

Ulrich opened and closed his eyes several times, then fell backward to the floor. His colleagues rushed over to him and began applying pressure to the wound. Gayle grabbed tightly onto Cooper's arm, fearing that she too might surrender to the darkness. Her entire life had changed in an instant, again, and this time it had taken a dangerous turn. She wasn't sure what the Gate Keeper's world was like, or why, and she certainly didn't know if she wanted to be a part of it.