

The Trouble With Earth

They weren't being followed. Gayle had checked the sensor logs everyday herself to see if any suspicious ships were in their wake, and they appeared to be alone in space, a week away from Earth. The fear mongering voice in the back of her head refused to let her forget about the confrontation their new associates had suffered, and she could feel the nagging doubt in the pit of her stomach like a rock. The readings told her that they had escaped without being connected to the Australians, and she hoped that she would soon be able to convince herself of that.

Because she couldn't, Gayle had been grumpy and unsociable, locking herself in her quarters for most of the trip. She leaned back into her cushy sofa and waited for the news feed she requested to upload. She knew she was sulking, and that everyone else noticed, but she didn't particularly care. The conflict she was being drawn into frightened and infuriated her. All of these years, loving the country in which she was born, even working for the government sworn to keep it free and peaceful, she had been betrayed. Everyone had been. Though she no longer had an inside view, the slight glimpse of what she did have in regard to the secret missions to find this artifact let her know that there was much going on in the world about which no one in the general public knew.

In the few months that the *Gossamer* had been flying, she realized that she had lost touch with some of the current events back home. Going back and forth to Mars, or even between the closer outposts, made it difficult to stay focused on what was happening on Earth below. There was so much to do and little incentive to pick up a paper or watch a news feed. What happened on Earth didn't really seem to directly affect her anymore. Gayle knew that wasn't true, but it felt like it was in the depths of space.

The computer told the businesswoman that the download was complete, so she turned her eyes to the screen. Shifting further into the cushions, she hit the remote and the newscast began. A dark haired woman with wet sand colored skin faded onto the screen, her body obscured under her anchor desk. With an exaggerated smile, she began with a story about the President traveling to Mexico.

She began the next story with a smile only slightly smaller. "Last night at the Lincoln Memorial, a group of protesters gathered, carrying signs with anti-government remarks."

The image shifted from the anchorwoman to video of the scene. The crowd appeared to be at least a thousand strong, and many of them held up white posters, their messages digitally brushed away. The mass of people formed a circle around the protective metal wall protecting the statute.

“Several men and women became violent when capitol security attempted to keep the crowd from denigrating the Memorial. Over two hundred arrests were made and at least ten injuries were reported,” the woman’s voice said as the camera continued to roll. The scene was a chaos of people bumping into each other like pinballs. The police wielded billy clubs like magic wands and sprayed chemical agents as liberally as air freshener.

As the anchorwoman finished, a man came to the foreground of the scene, his face clear on the screen, though contorted in pain. Gayle’s mouth dropped open as she recognized him, his unruly blond coif familiar, even after almost ten years. A policeman wrenched the thin man’s arm behind his back and slammed him into the manicured green grass to the side of the memorial. Though the restrained man did not fight, he received several more strong blows from the officer.

The businesswoman could hardly believe one of her old college friends was being beaten on the television news. Sean Cochran had been in a number of her political science courses and they had become good friends outside of class. He had always been a bit of a rebel, always wanting to protest something, but her conservative nature balanced them out well. They were on the two ends of the liberal spectrum for sure. Still, she would never picture him as someone who would need to be quelled by violence.

Gayle thought back to the last time they had met for dinner in D.C. It had been three years ago, and she was in the throws of her relationship with Rick. Sean had taken a job with a liberal think tank, one of the few remaining, apparently a gratuity of the conservative overlords in Congress. He was still trying to rally the troops around the Democratic ideals that he believed were being sucked away by the staunch Republicans ruling every facet of the government. With a few years behind him, and a wife and baby daughter, though, he actually seemed to have mellowed.

Shaking her head, Gayle guessed he hadn’t calmed completely, and now he was paying the price. The anchorwoman finished the story by

saying, "Police secured the scene within an hour and the Lincoln Memorial is now open to visitors."

The smiling, dark-haired anchorwoman paused as she looked into the camera, waiting for the next story's text to enter the teleprompter. With no remorse, she detailed a terrorist attack in London as if she were reporting on a child's soccer game. Not too many years ago, such attacks were rare anywhere in the world. In the last year, there had been ten in the U.S. alone.

Gayle sat forward on her couch and leaned her elbows on her knees. The world was shifting around her and she was allowing herself to fall severely out of touch. It was time she changed that, and herself. Being a bystander, and an inattentive one at that, wasn't the way she wanted to live her life.

The phone buzzed into her thoughts and she paused the still running newscast. Jamal, her attorney, popped on screen, a big smile on his face. His expression either meant they won, or they lost big, but he would still try to recover his fees.

"Hello, Jamal," she said. "Did the judge decide?"

"Yes, he did," the young lawyer beamed. "You are one lucky lady. He ruled completely in your favor. The *Gossamer Wings* is yours in the clear."

Her dour mood would not flee, but Gayle felt relieved enough to smile. "Thank God. And thank you, Jamal. You did a good job."

"No problem."

"Is there anything left to do?" she asked.

"No, it's over for you," he said. "They're not going to appeal."

Gayle sensed a hesitation in his voice. "What?"

The attorney's shoulders jumped a little and he shifted from side to side. "I was just wondering when I could expect payment of my invoices."

Letting forth a burst of astounded air, Gayle laughed to his face. "You'll get your money. Don't worry." She rolled her eyes at him through a smile. "Bye."

When the young man disappeared from the screen, she didn't call the news back up. Now that her personal life was secured, there was no excuse not to take more of an interest in the turmoil cropping up around her. To appease her conscience, Gayle knew what she had to do.



Zora Choi pounded away at her computer keyboard, finishing the notes for a passenger with a sore throat who just left sickbay. Since the trip had begun, she'd seen one other person with similar symptoms, and she hoped the bug wasn't passing around freely to everyone. It wasn't severe, but she didn't want to deal with a ship full of sick whiners.

The door opened again behind her, and she wanted to be grateful for the company. Unfortunately, people didn't usually come to see her with good news, so she dreaded it. She turned toward the sound of light footsteps, surprised to see Alexa coming toward her.

"Hey. Long time, no see," Zora said, standing up to greet her friend.

Alexa quirked a half grin and held up a hand. She was wearing the drab grey uniform the Captain had forced on the crew, and her hair was up in a pony tail. "I know. I've been a slug. Do you have something for an upset stomach? My dinner from last night didn't agree with me."

Zora took a step to her right and opened a drawer, rummaging through it for the drug she had in mind. "Sure. If you ate dinner with me more often, maybe that wouldn't happen," the doctor said, smiling.

Alexa's grin went away and she nodded. "I know. I'm sorry."

Holding a pill packet in her hands, Zora took a deep breath and slowly released it. She couldn't even joke with her friend anymore, it seemed. Some impenetrable barrier had arisen between them because of her confession, and she had no idea how to overcome it.

Alexa, her shoulders slumped, walked over to the tall stool near the exam table and perched atop it. "I've been in a bad mood lately and I can't seem to shake it. I didn't want to expose you to that," she said.

Zora shrugged. "You in a bad mood? I don't believe it." She extended her arm to hand Alexa the pill. The younger woman took it and studied

the package carefully. The doctor went to the sink to pour a small cup of water for her friend.

"I have been. And you don't want to see it."

Bad mood or not, Zora knew that the last thing she wanted was to be isolated from her friend. She hated having been so stupid. That one single confession, though true, had ruined the best part of her life. She was in love with Alexa, truly, but she would have preferred to remain her friend forever rather than the distant acquaintance that she was now. Unfortunately, there was no way to take back what she'd said and at the time, in the face of death, she had thought expressing herself was the right thing to do. Zora didn't like regretting that she was alive.

The doctor handed her the small cup of water. "Take the pill and it should help your stomach. Don't eat whatever you ate last night and come back if this doesn't help."

Nodding, Alexa wrestled the pill from its packaging, then downed it and the water in one big gulp. "Thanks." She reached out and touched the doctor's hands which were clasped at her middle. "And we'll get together, okay?"

Zora didn't know if that thought should give her hope, or only a sinking feeling for knowing that more pain was to follow. "Okay," she answered softly.

Alexa opened her mouth to say something else, but shut it when the sickbay door opened and the Captain walked through. He was in his uniform and jacket, finely pressed, his hair spiked and gelled to what he likely thought was perfection. The doctor didn't find it particularly attractive on him, but she knew she wasn't a very fair judge.

"Hello, ladies," Norman said, raising a hand to Zora. He then turned to Alexa and waited for her eyes to meet his. His stare bore through her for several seconds, an odd look on his handsome features. The younger woman concentrated on the floor at Zora's feet as if it were her first time seeing the Mona Lisa.

Norman tried too hard to please everyone, the doctor thought. He needed to learn that not everyone would love him, and as far as she knew, Alexa had little respect for the cavalier way their Captain treated women.

"Can I do something for you, Captain?" Zora asked, hoping to divert his attention from her friend.

Before Norman could answer, Alexa came out of her momentary hibernation and began moving toward the door. "I need to go," she said.

The doctor hated to see her leave, though she was encouraged that they might at least meet like the friends they had once been. "Okay. See you later," she said, hopefully.

Alexa nodded, her eyes still avoiding the Captain, and left the room.



Gayle waited with little patience for the connection to her mother in Dallas to go through. As if she were on hold to hear news about some fatal illness, she sat on the edge of her seat, head bowed, fingers interlaced in front of her. She didn't know if her mother would be able to help calm her emotions toward the reports she'd seen about Earth, but it was worth a try.

Light from her mother's face filled the darkened room when she appeared on the screen, bouncing blues and reds off Gayle's drawn skin. Her mother's hair was freshly combed and her old washed out blue bathrobe was pulled tight across her neck and chest. Michelle Darwin's bleary, puffy blue eyes evidenced her recent sleep.

"Gayle, is everything all right?" she asked, her voice rough.

The business woman mentally chastised herself for not thinking about the time. "Yeah, Mom. I'm sorry about the time difference. It's too easy to lose track out here."

The gray-haired woman nodded. "I'm sure it is. How are you?"

"I'm fine. I just wanted to ask you about something. Are you doing okay?"

"Yes. What has you so worked up you called me at this hour? And turn the light on. I can't see you," the older woman said, her motherly voice, the one reserved for when a child was in trouble, boomed out at Gayle as strongly as it had from her childhood.

Being grown up was a good thing. Gayle did not turn on the light. "I watched the news feed earlier about the riot at the Lincoln memorial. Did you see it?"

Her mother perceptibly stiffened. "Of course. What about it?"

"I saw a friend of mine, Sean Cochran, being beaten by the police. I'd like to know what was *really* going on there."

Michelle looked away from her daughter for a moment, then hard eyes turned back to the camera. "The word is that the demonstration was peaceful, but it unfortunately was the tenth one this month. The police, backed by the Republican Guard unit of the Secret Service, decided to make an example of the protesters."

Gayle made a chuffing noise and shook her head. She knew in her heart that the government was up to no good, but it still hurt when their activities were proven. Her mother's words, which would never have come were they not confirmed truth, only reinforced her ideas. "Are the people who were arrested still being held?"

"I—I don't know," her mother said.

The business woman leaned closer to the screen, surprised at what appeared to be tears welling in her mother's eyes. "Mom, what's wrong?"

The normally stoic woman sniffled. "There's something you should know, Gayle. I got a call from a friend of your father's. He said Roi told him that he was going to the demonstration, but no one has heard from him since. I think your father was arrested."

Gayle slumped back in her chair violently, the air rushing from her body like a deflating balloon. She hadn't seen her father in more than a year, and she suddenly realized that she hadn't thought of him much lately either. Since her parents divorced when she was fifteen, her contact with Roi Darwin had been inconsistent and often strained. She loved him, though, and the thought of him spending one night unjustly jailed sickened her.

"Have you called anyone to find out if he's locked up?" Gayle asked.

“Of course. The D.C. jails aren't disclosing the names of anyone arrested in the demonstration and neither is the Secret Service. They're treating the prisoners as insurgents.”

Putting both hands over her face, Gayle groaned. She was in no position to do anything at the moment, and wouldn't be for sometime. The best she could do would be to give her mother the names and numbers for the few people she trusted in Washington. In the least, she might be able to find out if he was actually arrested. If they were lucky, her friends might be able to secure his release.

After her mother jotted the information down, Gayle looked back to her. “Send me a message when you know something, okay?”

“I will, Honey. You just be careful out there and don't worry about your father. He can take care of himself,” Michelle said.

“I'm not just worried about him. I'm worried about you, about everyone. Space might be dangerous, but I'm beginning to believe that it's not the worst place in the universe.”



Alexa stopped in front of the antimatter chamber for a moment, admiring the simple, quiet machine that kept them moving. The controlled reactions going on within the hulking container had such violent potential. From her stop before it, though, it was impossible to tell. She didn't understand how it worked, and didn't care to, as long as it kept the ship flying.

Beyond the glass enclosed chamber, Alexa saw her real target standing in front of the only window in the engineering section. Gayle was leaning with one arm against the wall, staring out at the stars. She was dressed in plain khaki pants and an electric blue pullover shirt, her hair tied into a ponytail at the back of her head. Her posture slumped the tiniest bit.

“Hey, stranger,” Alexa said as she approached.

Gayle turned away from the portal to greet her. “Hi, Alexa. What's up?” she asked, always on alert for the next problem.

“Nothing. I just haven't seen you much in the last few days. Ricardo said he saw you sulking around up here. Is that what you're doing?” Alexa

knew she had more leeway than most when it came to confronting her friend.

"Yeah, mostly. I was trying to think some things through."

Alexa took a position beside her and they both turned to the blank canvas outside of the window. "Anything specific?"

"Yes. And no. There's so much that I can't seem to focus on one particular thing. I know life is going well for me, but everything feels so wrong." The businesswoman turned her back to the galaxy and faced Alexa, her body framed by the dark landscape.

"I know how you feel. The world just isn't quite right." Alexa swallowed hard and wiped a lock of hair from her eyes. "Do you remember what Zora said to me when those men hijacked the ship?"

Gayle chuckled. "Of course. How could I forget something as romantic as that?"

"Neither can I. Unfortunately, I can't decide how I feel about it. And while I'm trying to decide, my friendship with Zora is going to hell," Alexa said.

"What's to decide? Either you return the feelings or you don't, right?"

The guest relations manager shook her head. "You know it's not that easy. I love Zora, I really do. I thought she would be my closest friend for the rest of my life. For some reason, though, it never occurred to me that we should be more than friends."

Gayle leaned back against the glass. "If you aren't interested in a relationship with a woman, that kinda seals the deal."

Alexa shook her head, her chestnut locks waving. "No, it's not that. It's been a while, but I had a couple of brief encounters with women while I was in college."

The businesswoman held out a hand, unable to withhold a smile. "Whoa, you as a wild child? Hard to believe."

"Like I said, it was brief," Alexa said, chuckling. "Those experiences were just as pleasurable as any relationship I've had with a man. It's not the

pleasure part I'm worried about with Zora. She's just—I don't know—intimidating.”

Gayle nodded. “Yeah, she is that. Zora is intense, I think. When she is locked onto something, it's everything. Maybe that's what you're afraid of.”

“Maybe.” Alexa just wished she could figure out what her problem was and solve it. Or at least name it, and not feel like an ass for balking at the opportunity to have a sexual relationship with her friend.

Placing a hand on Alexa's arm, Gayle brought the woman back to reality. “One thing is for sure, though. You have to resolve your feelings, at least initially, and let Zora know what they are. This issue won't go away and it's going to destroy your friendship with Zora. I know that both of you care for the other deeply, and I would hate to see that happen.”

“Not to mention that it would make relations on the ship very strained.”

Gayle shrugged. “That too. There's always the bottom line.”

“Thank you,” Alexa smiled, thinking that she knew what she had to do. “Maybe you need to talk to your security chief in the same vein. There is almost visible tension between you and Cooper.”

A sly, embarrassed smile crept on to Gayle's face with a matching blush. “Perhaps you're right.”



The cold steel of the conference room always chilled her, as if the shining gray metal were as cold as it looked instead of the steady temperature of the air around it. Gayle and the crew had come together for some laughs in this room, even a mini-party or two. It was made for formality, however, and today it was serving its purpose.

Gayle walked into the room fresh from a full night's sleep, her black suit pressed to cardboard firmness. She acknowledged each of her crew by looking in their eyes as she scanned the table and sat down. Alexa sat nearest the head, her face as perky as a morning bird, which the woman often was. Beside her sat the Captain, who looked withered and tired, most likely from another insomnia filled night. On the other side of the large oval sat Ricardo. He was still wearing his smoke colored jumpsuit

and looked like he could fall asleep at any moment. The old man liked working when the rest of the world slept. Cooper was next to him, leaning back in the black leather chair, his thick arms crossed over his customary black T-shirt, his face emotionless. Gayle made a note to insist he wear the uniform. And next to him in a white smock, across from Alexa, Zora sat looking rested, yet restless of mind.

Despite their various emotional and physical states, each and every face looked interested in what she had to say. When she'd called the meeting, Gayle made it clear that there was a certain focus to this gathering, more so than some of their more informal 'how is everything going' sessions. Today, she had a purpose, and fat little butterflies swimming around in her stomach letting her know that life might never be the same.

"Thanks for coming everyone. As you might have guessed, I called this meeting to make an announcement or two." Several heads nodded and Gayle took the opportunity to clear her throat. "Some of you may already know this, but when I took my brief leave of absence from the ship, I was attending a trial. At stake in the suit was the future of this business. Lucky for us all, we won and I still own the ship.

"While I was away, I had some time to think about the course of our little enterprise, and how that interacts with our better natures."

Zora, her expression still dour and sleepy, said, "Some of us don't have better natures."

Gayle hoped she was joking, but somehow didn't think she was. The businesswoman smiled anyway. "That may be true. Nonetheless, there is a lot going on these days that deserves a second thought. I hate to say it, or even think it, but the government appears to be out of control. Rights of citizens are being abridged every day, and our elected officials aren't being honest with the people who put them in office.

"I don't know that there is a lot that I can do as an individual. I do, however, want to try."

Norman rubbed a hand over his face and leaned on the table, weary, but more awake. "What do you plan to do? And what about the business?"

"The transport business will continue to run as is. We've all got to make a living. We may have won our little legal battle, but if I don't make my loan

payments, we won't have a ship," Gayle said. She shifted in her seat, uncomfortable at the thought of losing her business, or letting the crew know how precarious the money situation stayed. "Thus far, we've been forced into observing various incidents obviously related to the government. We have mostly taken the high road and acted only out of necessity. That is about to change.

"We are in a unique situation to evaluate what is going on in the solar system and to react when appropriate. If that means taking action against the government, like we are now by helping the Australians, then I don't plan to hesitate." She again surveyed the faces of her crew, not noting any serious disagreement.

"I don't know how you all feel, but I believe we are on the precipice of great change in our society. I don't think we're going to be on the popular side, but I do believe we are on the right side." Gayle smiled and relaxed into the chair, glad she'd gotten her speech out. "I couldn't live with myself if I didn't do something. If anyone does not like the direction in which we are moving, I'll understand completely. Now is the time to speak up."

Norman cleared his throat and turned an alert and serious face to his boss. "I think you know that I am very loyal to the government you accuse of being corrupt. Normally, I wouldn't oppose them." His crystal blue eyes pierced hers for several long moments. "In this case, however, I think you're right. Things aren't fair back home and something needs to be done. If we can be a small part of that, and still continue on our business, I'm willing to try."

Everyone nodded, and a decision seemed to be made.