

Searching For Truth

Feeling solid ground under her feet after weeks at space, even Martian soil, always brought a huge sense of relief to Gayle. She had the utmost confidence that her ship was safe and that her crew was as reliable as any, but with the general dangers of flying and space travel, there was no security like being firmly on the ground. Not to mention that the seclusion of the Earth to Mars journey made everyone a little soft in the head, regardless of any lingering fears about the basic nature of their trip.

Gayle was pleased they'd made it to Mars and were ready to offload both their cargo, some of it from the government, and their passengers. Ulrich St. James and his Gate Keepers were anxious to get to their work as well. Gayle didn't mind gaining some distance from them either. She and Norman had watched them through the check point, which went off without a hitch.

Having giving her several evil eyed looks while they were dealing with the Gate Keepers, Gayle knew that Norman still hadn't embraced her decision to support the rebel organization. She wasn't completely sure of it herself, if she was completely honest. It was simply something she had to do and now hoped that it would turn out for the best. Right was right, and the government was clearly wrong. Norman would come to see things that way, or at least learn to cope with her activities.

She supposed it was the soldier in him that made Norman cling so tightly to his loyalty to the United States' leaders. Though he was no longer in the military, he still saw the President as his commander in chief. Gayle, on the other hand, had no loyalty for those who held the offices. Her loyalty was to what the government stood for and was made to promote: freedom. Those who currently held the supposedly elected offices, as well as many of their predecessors, promoted only their own greed and power.

Though she strove to keep all her crew members happy, Norman would have to live under her view of the world. She thought he'd be able to do that with minimal pain. At this point, it certainly wasn't a major issue.

After the last crate glided out of the elevator, Gayle and Norman followed it into the lobby that served as their entrance into the Mars dome. The lobby was built as a circular hub for the elevators. Three doors broke off in front, with rows of chairs in between the farthest two for people waiting to get on, or for others to get off, the elevator. The crate

broke to the left toward the cargo hold, while Norman and Gayle went to the right. They stopped at the door and Norman rapped his large, meat slab hands on it. The sound of metal splashing against flesh dominated the otherwise empty rooms.

A plump man in his forties opened the door, his head devoid of hair save for a short cropped white collection on top of each ear. He put out his hand and took the manifest as Norman handed it to him as if he was a teacher accepting a homework assignment. The Captain remained stone-faced as the man rectified the list with the actual offloaded cargo.

"Everything matches up," the round man said.

Norman smiled like a proud papa. "We aim to please," he said.

The man plopped the manifest back into the Captain's hands. "Welcome to Mars," he said, then turned away.

Gayle laughed, putting her hand on Norman's shoulder to drag him from the room. The door slammed behind them as soon as their bodies were out of range for injury. "I think I'm going to put you in charge of vendor relations," she told him.

The Captain flashed a boyish smile, deep dimples creasing his cheeks. "That was not a typical example of my business interaction skills."

"I don't know, you seemed to be comfortable. Maybe I need to start observing your interactions more often," she joked.

Norman glared sideways at her, a grin still on his lips. "I don't think so. You know that I'm a smooth operator. I can't have you cramping my style. That guy has been here too long or something."

They walked together toward the entrance into the general public section of the dome. Gayle enjoyed having pleasant interaction with Norman. Of late, it seemed all of their time together consisted of problem solving or strategizing. She'd forgotten the playful banter they often shared when they were relaxed and content. Though they occasionally had issues, it was nice to remember that they were also friends.

The bazaar buzzed with a post-lunch crowd, probably mostly tourists, as they emerged into the first open area of the dome. The government tightly controlled the populations of residents and visitors of Mars, but that didn't mean that the dome ever really turned into a ghost town. With the

livelihood of a few thousand stores and businesses depending on a steady stream of customers, it benefited everyone to keep a steady stream of people coming through. Not to mention the amount of money to be made off of the hefty fee it took to get to the red planet.

"There's your boy," Norman said, looking to the bank of shops to his right.

Gayle ignored the slight tension that had returned to her friend's voice and followed his gaze. Her heart smiled when she spotted Cooper walking toward them, his face and body in determined motion. He was wearing a blue sleeveless spandex shirt that left nothing to the imagination and only slightly looser work out shorts. It certainly didn't take much to get her security chief started on a vacation.

"Hey, Cooper. Headed to the beach?" Norman asked.

The bigger man laughed and shook his head. He put his hands on his hips as he stopped in front of them. "Not today. Gayle wanted to check this place out and look around a bit for the artifact."

Norman turned to Gayle, his face a brighter shade of pink than it had been a moment before. "You don't have to do that."

Gayle shrugged her shoulders and started them all walking through the plaza again. "I know, but I want to."

"We got those guys here to look for it and we don't have a further obligation." The Captain looked over to Cooper imploringly, most likely wanting him to join the protest, but the bigger man said nothing.

"I know I don't have an obligation. I just want to do this. It's about a million to one that I would find anything anyway," she said. Norman's concern pleased her, but she hoped he wasn't getting the notion that he could boss her around.

Norman put his hand on her shoulder, halting their movement and turning her toward him. "Gayle, it's dangerous. There have been people killed for this thing."

She looked at his hand, shrugged it off, and continued walking. "I know, that's why I'm bringing protection." She pointed to Cooper beside her with a thumb. "Don't worry about me, Norman. I can take care of myself."



"I never realized the dome was so big," Gayle said as she and Cooper walked side by side through a souvenir market.

Cooper nodded. "Doesn't look big. Must be because it's built in a circle."

They'd been touring all of the halls and indoor roads available to them since arriving on the planet. The habitat was set out like a crop circle with one big hole in the middle, and radiating rows of increasing diameter flanking it. Each ring had its own name, which attempted to indicate its purpose. Gayle had thought it logical for a maintenance area when they passed through Monkey Wrench Row, and it seemed appropriate when they went through Fine Housing. Family Entertainville made her shake her head a little, though, and Pumping Iron Station wasn't much better. She wanted to write a letter to her Congressman, however, when they arrived in Alternate Sexiverse, which had a sign at the entrance that said everyone had to be eighteen to enter. Gayle hadn't thought they'd need an entire ring, and a relatively long one at that, to provide adult entertainment to the Mars residents and tourists.

Despite that area, each spot that they visited seemed clean and civil. Each ring had a variety of shops and restaurants that made them self-sufficient. The arrangement allowed for easy navigation by tourists and residents could find the essentials of life near their quarters. It was extremely efficient. She was surprised it had been developed by the government.

Gayle and Cooper had walked through the layers all afternoon, casually looking for anything or anyone suspicious. The only strange people they saw were the Gate Keepers, who tried to blend into the crowd, but somehow failed. Gayle and Cooper spent the time for the most part enjoying each other's company.

"Getting close to our rooms. Done for the day?" Cooper asked.

"I guess so. My feet aren't used to this gravity," she said, flexing her toes and feeling a slight burn.

Cooper stopped at a booth displaying various Earth curios. It stood at least ten feet tall and was shaped like a quarter moon. Small shelves lined the walls to hold the shopkeeper's wares. Cooper picked up a snow

globe with the Statue of Liberty standing tall inside, then a small mockup of the moon with an American flag stuck in the textured gray dirt.

“What are you doing?” Gayle asked. She hadn’t thought her security chief would be interested in such oddities.

The big man smiled and moved into the center of the floor space, which was at a maximum ten square feet. Gayle chuckled and watched her friend—or whatever he was now—and wondered what he could be thinking. Each moment they spent together seemed to build the suspense between them. Gayle knew that sooner or later they were going to be in bed together, and she honestly hoped it was sooner. The more she learned about him, his little idiosyncrasies, the depth of his sense of humor, even his dark side, the sexier he became.

Cooper picked up something Gayle couldn’t see off a lower shelf and examined it for a few moments. In his tight shirt, she could easily study the contours of his shoulders and back. He wasn’t cut to the bone, as he had a fair layer of padding, but the dominant muscles bulged in the appropriate places. Gayle had seen him do his resistance exercises and she understood perfectly how he maintained his bulk. Even more so, she appreciated the way it made him look.

After speaking with the shopkeeper, the dark man turned back to Gayle and walked to her, a mischievous smirk on his face. “Got you something,” he said, cupping a small object in his hands.

With a red heat filling her face, Gayle stared at his hands in awe. “What?”

“Trinket,” he said. The bowl of his hands opened to reveal a basset hound figurine. The little dog stood an inch tall, with his ears almost that long. His big, droopy eyes stared up at Gayle much like she’d seen from Fifty every time he wanted something since she’d had him.

“Thanks,” she whispered, thinking about the bare spaces in her quarters on the ship where she’d never taken the time to put any knick knacks. Gayle cupped her hands under his and wrapped her thumbs around his fingers.

She’d been hoping the moment would come soon, and she thought she’d know it when it did. Looking up into Cooper’s warm caramel eyes, Gayle knew it was time to make things happen. She pulled his hands toward her and leaned forward, moving in slow motion. Cooper also took the moment for what it was and met her halfway. Their lips met in soft

embrace, a sweet simple kiss that said thank you and promised much more. The kiss lasted only a few seconds that stretched into infinity with emotion.

Gayle pulled away and took the figure from Cooper, holding it like a priceless treasure. He grinned and put a hand behind her back, motioning with his head for them to continue toward their living quarters. Gayle went along happily, feeling as though she were going in the right direction.



Covering her mouth, Gayle didn't try to stop the long yawn as it coursed through her, a sign from her body that it was not done recuperating from the day before. She smiled as she thought about the previous night, visions of Cooper filling her head. They hadn't picked up where the kiss left off. The fact that he didn't want to had been a little disappointing, and a little thrilling. Instead, they'd spent the night in Cooper's room talking and watching movies. If he was trying to prove she wasn't a one night stand, her security chief was doing a superb job.

The corporate ring of the Mars dome felt every bit like walking through a high rise in Washington. A thick grade of carpet cushioned her steps, and various pieces of art and sculpture lived on the walls. People in crisp business suits passed her, along with a random security guard, as she moved to the conference area where Gerard Oliver asked that she meet him.

Living a corporate life on Mars likely had special perks to draw the best there. All of the largest corporations had presences on the planet. Gayle didn't quite understand the logic, but they seemed to think that having some of their business being conducted from alien soil increased their reputation, and sales, back on Earth. The expense couldn't be outweighed by the profit, however. She supposed it was a way to show off.

By the time she came to the conference section of the Wall Street ring, Gayle couldn't help but find herself in a pleasant mood. She'd wanted to muster up some ill will to dish out to Gerard, but her current positive thoughts about life would not let her. The shape of the hall bowed out like a plugged water hose to provide ample space to gather a crowd. White doors rimmed the perimeter of the large room like twenty all-seeing eyes.

She knocked on number 125 and opened it when she heard a permissive squeak from inside. Oliver perched behind a black metal table, his hands steepled in front of him. He probably didn't like that she was ten minutes late, but his potential displeasure only contributed to her feelings of contentment.

"Good morning, Gerard. How are you?" she asked.

The government envoy did not brighten at her smile. "I'm fine, Ms. Darwin."

"I'm glad to hear it," she said. "You've been away far too long."

Though his eyes remained dead, Gerard smiled. His brownish-red hair and pink skin gave the government man a youthful appearance, but stress lines were beginning to form around his eyes and mouth.

Gerard tapped the table impatiently and leaned back in his chair. "Why don't you sit down? We have much to discuss." He opened up a paper filled folder as Gayle complied. "I plan to remedy my absence beginning with this trip back to Earth and beyond. I'd like to become a bigger presence on the ship."

"If you've recovered from our little kidnapping incident, I think that's a fine idea," Gayle said. She remembered how much Gerard had been upset about their run-in with the government forces searching for the artifact. During most of the time the *Gossamer* had been stranded in space, Gerard had been hiding in his room.

He gave her a narrow-eyed, go-to-hell look. "I'm fine. Thanks for your concern. Since I've been away for a bit, I thought a report from you on the ship's recent exploits would be helpful."

Gayle shrugged. "Not much to report. We've been making standard pick-ups and drops since we saw you last. No real excitement." She slid a batch of papers across the table to him. "Business is picking up."

The government envoy, or spy, as she liked to call him, did not smile. He looked downright disgusted by the news that the *Gossamer* was doing well. The papers didn't seem to please him any more than that.

"So it appears," he said.

Seeing a prime opportunity when it looked her in the eye, Gayle stood from the conference table. "If that's all, I've got a few things to do."

"That's not much of a status report. I expected a little detail."

Gayle laughed at him, which caused an evil crease to invade Gerard's face. "That was the detailed version. You've been on a transport from Earth to here. Nothing happens. There's nothing to tell."

"For the most part I agree with that, but you've done more than make one trip to Mars since last I saw you," he said, setting the documents down in a pile in front of him.

The fact that he was getting pissed off only encouraged the businesswoman. "Everything you need to know is in those reports. I lead a very boring life. Why don't you go back and tell Antwon Gardner that and perhaps he'll leave me alone."

Gerard pursed his lips and his shoulders took on a defeated slump. "I would hate to keep you from your hot date. If I have any questions, I can always ask you on the way home to Earth."

With a smile at her nemesis, Gayle ventured back into the heart of Mars.



Though she had dreamed as a child of zipping among the stars in her own ship, if any one had told Gayle five years ago that she'd be driving a car on Mars, she would have pegged them as insane. Yet she found herself doing just that, wearing a pressure suit, and sitting next to a man she was seriously falling for. And he hadn't once bitched about her driving.

Gayle laughed out loud, prompting Cooper to look at her quizzically, his questioning eyes only partially visible behind his mask. He didn't ask what she was giggling about, and Gayle found that his selective silence was one of the things she liked about him most. He seemed to have a sense for what was important and what should be left alone.

With the sun steadily making its way toward the horizon, the bright sky from earlier in the day was now more of the dirty red that she'd come to expect from Mars. The cloudless air hung over them like a stuffy blanket, and the dirt beneath their wheels crunched with each turn. Overall, Mars

was a depressing place and she understood why no life had ever wanted to take root here.

"You surprised they let us roam the planet like this?" Cooper asked.

Maneuvering around a large rock, Gayle shrugged, a motion swallowed in her suit. "I guess. It seems like letting people roam the planet would be inviting a disaster. They made us sign enough waivers, though, so I guess they're safe."

"Cost a king's ransom."

Gayle nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, more than I wanted to pay." She drove the rover off a small embankment and they crashed back to the surface. On Earth, the landing would have been violent. On Mars, it was almost like they had landed on an air cushion. "It's worth it, though," Gayle said.

Cooper smiled and loosened his grip on the front hand rail. "Yeah."

There wasn't much to see on the planet's surface other than the amazing horizon and a few rocks. She drove in a circular path from the dome, expecting to see more man-made structures. They didn't find any until the car came within a mile of their starting point. As she drove the rover closer, Gayle realized they had found a construction site. Though she hadn't heard anything about it, the government was apparently building a second dome.

The beams of the outer skeleton stretched into the Martian sky and the ground beneath had been dug out and built up. The next step would be establishing the outer walls and the roof itself, making the structure a shell of a future city. For the moment, though, the building remained unfinished, and there were still deep crevasses around the place that would need to be filled.

Several construction vehicles sat parked at the edge of the site, and Gayle pulled up next to them. "This would be an interesting place to hide something for a short time. Wouldn't it?"

Cooper nodded and exited the vehicle, confirming his silent answer. The businesswoman followed suit. She enjoyed the light crunch of the soil beneath her boots as she walked across the surface, red footprints remaining in her wake. They walked to the foundation and climbed up. It

looked like concrete, but she imagined that it must be made of some other new fangled material that she didn't know about.

Gayle wondered what sort of structures were beneath her feet. She was relatively confident that the government would insist that the dome contain various hiding places for their more prominent secrets, in whatever form they might be. Those secrets either were, or one day would be in the chambers she knew existed in the Martian soil.

She followed Cooper toward the far corner of the slab, where walls stood forming several rooms. Packed into the roof-lacking structures were a wealth of construction supplies. Gayle wondered why there were no worker's on site. She supposed they were already off for the day, and probably in the adult section of the dome relaxing.

A strong hand on her arm startled Gayle momentarily before she was dragged into the corner and thrust between several stacks of supplies. As he pushed her into a squatting position, Cooper put one finger over his mouth to stop her protest. He lowered down beside her, at the ready to spring into action if the need arose.

When Gayle quit looking at him like he'd gone insane, she caught a glimpse through the unfinished west wall of the room at what had provoked Cooper's behavior. A four-person squad of military men, dressed in black uniforms, was approaching from the direction of the dome like a swarm of death. She didn't have a completely clear view of them, but her heart froze when she noticed a civilian being led by a rope behind them. He was barely keeping up and flailing everywhere to prove it. His gray EV suit didn't look thick enough to withstand a fall against the rocks under his feet.

The group stopped about fifty yards away in front of the open maw at the edge of the foundation. The thought flashed through her mind that the soldiers might throw the man in the hole, but she quickly dismissed it. At least she did until they began screaming at the man, and their garbled words, no more than high and low pitched yells, drifted to her on the stale wind.

The men obviously wanted answers, or something more, from the man in front of them. Someone hit him behind the knee and forced him to kneel, and he had to put a steadying hand on the ground to keep from falling. As he caught his balance, the gray suited man put up his hands, either praying for forgiveness or declaring his lack of knowledge. The soldier in front of him didn't seem to care.

The captive and his prosecutor jawed back and forth for several minutes, with the soldier pushing or striking the man several times. Cooper had to push Gayle back into a crouch a couple of times when she got lost in the horror she was witnessing and forgot that they were hiding. There was no doubt now that their lives would be forfeit if they were discovered.

Gayle shuttered when the soldier pulled his pulse rifle from behind his hip and pointed it at the captured man's head. She kept telling herself that there wasn't anything they could do. She whispered it aloud as the shouting intensified and the poor man in the grey suit begged just as hard. It was clear to Gayle that he knew nothing, could say nothing that would satisfy the soldiers. Whether they realized it or not was another question.

The question got an answer when the soldier, his mask covered face concentrated on his victim, pulled the trigger beneath his finger. A single burst of blue light erupted from the barrel of the gun, burying itself in the captive's chest. The force of the blast toppled him backward and he disappeared into the dark rent in the Martian soil.

Gayle suddenly realized that Cooper had his hand over her mouth and was once again pulling her backward toward their concealed cubby hole. She stopped the scream that was trying to tear loose and patted his arm. Their eyes met and she tried to express without a word that she was in control, if not yet calm. She didn't think she would be for a long while after seeing such a brutal sight. Pulling Cooper to the ground, Gayle leaned into his body and held him in a comforting hug.

They remained embraced until long after the soldiers marched off toward the dome, their heavy boot steps passing only a few feet from their hiding spot. Gayle knew that they needed to wait until the men were comfortably dispersed so that they would not be related to the incident. After almost an hour, when the sun was finally slipping past the red horizon, Cooper nudged her forward and pulled her up.

"Need to go," he said.

She nodded. "Yeah, me too." She smiled, even though she didn't feel like it.

"You know what I mean. We need to get back to our rooms."

"Yeah, I know. I don't think they saw us, though," she said hopefully.

Though he was biting his lip, Cooper nodded in agreement. "They didn't see us or we'd be dead. Let's go."

They slipped into another silence while Cooper drove them back to the dome, carefully rolling across the pock marked planet. Filling out the necessary paperwork on the car with the Mars officials took a few minutes, thankfully just enough time for her to completely regain her composure. She typically considered herself hard and unemotional, but she'd never seen anything quite like an execution before. Never would she have suspected that owning a transport company would afford her the awful privilege of seeing so many people die.

Traversing the layers of the dome took longer than usual with people out and about getting dinner and other evening necessities. She could think of nothing she wanted to do more than jump onto her semi-comfortable bed, curl under the cover with Fifty, and close off the images pouring through her mind with mindless sleep. Escaping wouldn't solve her current problems, but at least they would be delayed a little while.

Gayle focuses her attention on her surroundings when Cooper put a cautioning hand on her arm, slowing her progress toward her safe haven. In the corridor before them, with dark eyes lasering through her, stood a tall, drawn man wearing a black trench coat and a haunted expression. He had short cropped, bleach blond hair and his skin was so pale that she wondered if he'd ever been to Earth and stood under the sun. His heavy army boots and black work pants completed what she had come to understand was almost a uniform for the Gate Keepers.

As the distance between them closed, Cooper put his body in between and stopped her in the middle of the hall. All the people whom they'd been maneuvering around were now gone, leaving them alone with the strange man. His eyes remained locked on Gayle, and he walked to her with no hesitation.

"What's your name?" he asked, his voice almost robotic.

Gayle considered not answering, but she knew they might not have time for games. "Gayle Darwin."

She tensed when the man thrust his hand into his coat, as did Cooper beside her. The pleading look in the man's eyes made Gayle think he didn't mean them harm. With so much deceit going on around her, though, she had no way of knowing and she didn't necessarily trust her instincts. The object he withdrew was a flat stone disk, perhaps a half inch

tall. He held it in the palm of his hand and it barely covered the entire surface. The texture of the object looked like dark, dirty brown sand paper.

"I must give this to Ulrich," he said, his voice a hoarse whisper.

She pointed behind him down the hallway. "You passed his room. He's ten doors on the left, if he's there."

He nodded and departed without another word. Gayle turned back to Cooper, trying to decide if they should follow him, or count their blessings that they'd made it through the day.



Cooper rolled his caramel eyes at Gayle's back as he watched her progress down the hall toward Ulrich's room. He had suggested that they return to their quarters for some rest and get a more thorough report from their rebel friend tomorrow. Gayle, however, decided that she had to know if the object they'd seen was the allegedly powerful artifact. It certainly didn't look that impressive.

Where Gayle went, Cooper had no choice but to follow. The big man quickened his step and caught up with her. Though her steps may have been shorter, Gayle had a quick walk that outpaced most. Her mind worked much the same way. The security chief decided about a minute after he met her that her intelligence clearly outstretched his, and she was full of good intentions. Given the questionable choices of his past, it wasn't hard to trust her instincts.

Within seconds they had the squirrely man in the trench coat within view. He was frozen in the middle of the corridor, only ten feet from Ulrich's room, his back to them. It only took a moment to see what had his attention. Ten armed guards were rushing his way from the far end of the hall, their pulse rifles drawn and jacked. Cooper thought the man would run back toward her and Gayle, though he wouldn't have a chance. He didn't move a muscle, however, which made his seizure quick and easy for the black uniforms.

The military men didn't seem to notice Cooper and Gayle. They simply dragged the Gate Keeper by the arms and disappeared down the passage. Cooper thanked the spirits that they had not been seen talking to the man.

"Come on," Gayle said, moving toward Ulrich's room.

Cooper didn't want to go, didn't want to be involved in any of this anymore. He knew they had no choice at this point. They knew too much to go back. "He's gonna go ballistic," he said.

Ulrich stood on alert behind the doorway, his arms loosely at his side, his normal stern look on his features. "Something's happened," Gayle said, and barged into the room.

The drawn man peered questionably at her, but stood aside to make room for them both. "What is it?"

She waited for Cooper to settle behind her and the door to shut. "One of your men showed us the artifact about a minute ago." Ulrich's face showed skepticism at her claim. "It was a brown, stone disk about three inches in diameter." She formed a circle with her hands to demonstrate.

The Gate Keeper smiled tentatively, recognizing the object he so fervently sought. "Where is he?"

"Probably dead," Cooper said matter-of-factly. "He was almost at your door when a group of military grabbed him."

Ulrich sighed and cut his eyes to the floor. He moved the short distance to his bed and slowly sank down upon it, his hand gripped his head as if he had a strong headache.

"What can we do?" Gayle asked.

The pale, thin man shook his head, and Cooper thought he looked much older than he had a few moments ago. "You should take some time to reconsider your decision to help us," Ulrich said. When he looked up, his eyes were dark and distant.

"Why?" The businesswoman asked.

"Because now that both pieces of the artifact are secured, there will be a war between the United States and those groups interested in the cause of freedom." Ulrich looked pleadingly at both of them. "When this war is over, either the U.S. or the Gate Keepers will cease to exist."