

# Circular

Two pairs of feet and one set of paws reverberated off the steel grated flooring of the hallway as Gayle, Cooper, and Fifty padded steadily away from Gayle's quarters. The forty-five pound dog jogged ahead, his nose sniffing out trails of other people's scents and the myriad of competing smells aboard the ship. Not long before he had been at the foot of Gayle's bed whining, eager to get some exercise during another boring day between Earth and Mars.

Gayle could sympathize. While this trip had been more enjoyable than some given her increasingly interesting relationship with Cooper, she too was ready to be home. She was nervous about what might await them there, but, as she usually did, she hoped for the best.

Fifty stopped outside of Zora's door and sniffed the opening for a while. The artificial sunlight provided by the overhead tracks of lights reflected blue off the shiny black fur on his back. His human companions stopped beside him and waited patiently. Fifty had adapted to the ship well for a dog who naturally wanted to run and play outside. Gayle no longer had to fear that he would try to pee on any of the bulkheads since he took easily to his designated relief spot in her bathroom. He still occasionally liked to alarm her by hiking his leg on a chair leg or something. He didn't release any liquid when he did it, usually only giving her a smirk and moving on. Gayle supposed genetic selection and cloning could only breed out so much from an intelligent animal, and perhaps add a few things more.

When the long and thick beast moved on, his thick little legs churning like a train wheel, Cooper and Gayle matched his cadence and followed. "Zora is afraid of him, I think," Gayle told Cooper.

"How could she be afraid of him? He's a teddy bear," he answered.

Gayle shrugged. "Maybe she got bit by a dog at some point. She's just stiff around him."

"More important things to be scared of," Cooper said.

So many thoughts ran through her head that she knew she could be frightened about. Foremost among the images was her crew and passengers stepping off the ship and into the Earth Elevator. She wished

she knew if Oliver had arranged for someone to meet them to interrogate the Gate Keepers.

"Do you think there will be an incident when we get to Earth?" she asked.

Cooper tossed his hands up. "Don't know. If they do, guess it will prove that what Ulrich says is true."

Gayle nodded, pausing again behind Fifty as he stopped to investigate an apparently naked spot on the floor. "I suppose so. Or perhaps nothing will happen and we'll be left to wonder."

"We'll see," he said. "Military has other means of tracking people. Maybe in the least they won't want to have a confrontation at the elevator. Ecuador is on a lot of reporters' radar. If they want the Gate Keepers, they can get them somewhere else."

"If they're going to get them, I hope they wait. I don't think I can see that kind of thing again," Gayle said.

Cooper touched her upper arm. "Could be a battalion of soldiers waiting when we reach the ground," he said.

Gayle laughed. "You're so comforting."

He smiled and they continued walking behind the dog. One more right turn and they would be in the last passageway leading to her room. The trek they followed to walk the dog was short and circular, but it was all they could do in the confines of the ship. Fifty seemed to enjoy it nonetheless.

A brief fantasy of her and Cooper collapsing onto the bed in a passionate embrace crossed Gayle's mind and she pushed it away. She found herself so often lately thinking about him, wishing he would take her in his arms and make love to her. Wanting him to make her forget the issues about which she was uncertain, and to leave her with no doubt that he was going to make her happy.

Cooper was weird like that, though. With his background of being a swarthy criminal and general miscreant, she had expected him to proposition her for sex long before now. To her disappointment, they'd shared a few lovely kisses, but nothing more. Her libido, which had been on vacation for quite a while, wanted the kisses to turn into more. Her

romantic side had to battle to tell her brain and body that he was being chivalrous.

Gayle smiled as they strolled silently together. She always wanted what she didn't have. If he had tried to get her in bed the first night they'd met, she would have written him off as a scum bag. Now that taking their relationship another step wasn't going as fast as she wanted, she was frustrated about that too. Her nature wouldn't let her be happy.

What annoyed her most, she supposed, about Cooper's lack of advances and even the Gate Keeper situation, was that she wasn't in control. She hated not dictating every little aspect of her life. No matter how unhappy it made her, however, she knew that there was nothing she could do about it.



Gayle was on her third lap pacing around the conference table, circling the three men she had summoned to meet her on what she obviously thought was important business. Norman agreed that they needed to talk. If she didn't sit down, though, he didn't know if he could control the urge to tie her down to a chair and throw a gag in her mouth.

"Ulrich, the main reason I've called this gathering is to let you know that we are worried about what might happen when we get back to Earth tomorrow," Gayle said. She paused behind the chair at the head of the table and rested her hands on the tall leather back.

The thin, drawn Gate Keeper looked to her without concern. "What makes you worry?"

Gayle exchanged a glance with Cooper, who was seated to her right as if he were second in command. "Gerard Oliver came to me the other day demanding that he be allowed to question the passengers. It seems he's been given information that there are Gate Keeper's aboard."

Ulrich showed no emotion. "It was a wise decision to not let that happen."

"I agree, but that's not the problem now. The problem is that Oliver might be calling ahead to Earth and someone might be waiting there for you when we debark." Gayle looked at the man as if he'd grown a third eye.

Norman had the same fear as Gayle about their arrival on Earth. If Oliver had as big a bee in his bonnet as Gayle indicated, and if she'd pissed him off enough, he no doubt would make sure a nasty welcoming party met them. He'd told her time and time again, however, that taking up the Gate Keepers' cause was a dangerous proposition that they should avoid. The strong willed woman had insisted, though, and the results were now her fault.

"This is a situation that could put everyone on board at risk and we need to plan ahead," Norman offered.

Cooper leaned forward and cleared his throat before joining the conversation. "Most likely scenario is that they'll detain all the passengers for questioning. Might ought to let everyone know it could be coming."

"That's a good idea," Gayle said, flashing Cooper a smile Norman had never been given. "I hate that my passengers might be interviewed, but honestly, I'm worried about the less likely scenarios that might take place."

"Like what?" Ulrich asked.

Gayle took a deep breath, and the tight red blouse covering her bosom heaved. "I'm afraid that there will be soldiers there and people will be arrested."

Ulrich shook his head and scoffed. "Nonsense. The military will not risk a major incident. They want no one to know we are even a threat," he said, his muted Australian accent more prevalent with his emotion.

Cooper tapped on the table, drawing everyone's attention. "Can't be true. They already attacked Gate Keepers out in the open once at the elevators. Bet they'd do it again. You got what they want."

"None of the people on this transport have the artifact. They know that."

Gayle lifted her hands off the chair and waived her fingers in surrender. "I hope you're right, but I don't have that much faith. I think you should be prepared."

"My people are always prepared. We are always a target of our oppressors," Ulrich said. His voice had the tone of someone beaten down, yet still willing to fight for what is right.

“Only thing we can do is send everyone down in a large group again. Unless the Keepers want to stay aboard this time,” Cooper proposed.

Ulrich stood and waived him off. “No, we must go back to Australia. There is much work to do now.”

Gayle sighed again and stood tall at the front of the table. “What will you do if they try to stop your men?”

The lanky Gate Keeper stood stock still for several moments. “We will do what we must. As long as no one provokes my men, there will be no trouble,” he said. Ulrich nodded toward Gayle and the two men at the table, then walked from the room.

Gayle watched him, shaking her head, her hands grasping each other tightly in front of her body. “I don’t like this,” she said.

Cooper only matched her shaking head, like a loyal parrot. Norman agreed with her feeling too. He hoped that Ulrich knew what he was talking about.



Thirty people packed into *Earth Elevator One*, all of them eager to set foot on solid ground. No one was more anxious than Gayle to offload her cargo, the most troublesome of which were five men in trench coats and black sunglasses. Cooper had told them to wear glasses so that they might confuse any facial scanning devices that might be used to try to identify them.

Gayle was still nervous about reaching the bottom, but there was nothing she could do at this point. They had crowded everyone together in hopes of making identification even more difficult. She knew, though, that if the military was waiting for them and knew who they were looking for, none of their little cheap tricks would help.

Standing against the wall next to Cooper and Norman, Gayle took a deep breath and tried to calm her nerves. Her fist held the stabilization handle in a death grip. If something did happen when they offloaded, she needed a solid base to start from mentally and physically. She was typically good under pressure, but stress could make her normal demeanor seem like a ghost in the wind. She closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable.

The elevator doors opened in two shifts, first the inner doors, then the outer ones. Gayle motioned to Cooper and Norman and moved to the front of the car. She wanted to be the first to exit so that they could assess the situation. What she saw as they emerged into the small processing area made her stomach turn. Four soldiers were waiting on the far side of the room, rifles hanging off their shoulders and flak jackets visible across their chests. A fifth government representative, a tall, thin man with salt and pepper hair, stood to the right of the soldiers.

Gayle only realized she'd paused when Cooper gently grasped her elbow. He began moving her toward the service area, where Norman was already exchanging paperwork with the attendant. Acting normal was the best course of action; the only one, really. Now that the military was involved, she had to hope that the soldiers would somehow not recognize their prey.

The other passengers and crew members shuffled out behind her, and she didn't dare look back to see how Ulrich and his fellows were reacting. Instead, she looked interested in the paperwork exchange and pretended everything was fine. Norman passed papers back and forth with the man as if nothing were wrong.

After a few moments, the attendant walked over to his desk to finish the inventory exchange. Gayle and Cooper took that opportunity to turn around to the slowly moving mob. Ulrich seemed well composed, at least as far as his expression outside of the dark shades over his eyes went. Within the group, he and his people walked toward the exit doors, passing through a checkpoint where they scanned their identification cards, and toward the soldiers, like everyone else.

The soldiers simply stood on either side of the doors scowling, but making no move to apprehend anyone. If they weren't there to do so, Gayle had no clue as to why they would be there. She supposed a show of force could be effective, but surely they were beyond empty threats at this point.

By the time the Gate Keepers were within five feet of the door, Gayle began to have hope that nothing would happen. Then the firefight broke out.

One of the Gate Keepers, a short, petite man Ulrich had called Daniel stopped when he was even with the soldiers and turned to face the men on his right. Another Gate Keeper named Nizu did the same on the left.

Almost simultaneously, the two men pulled pulse pistols from beneath their long jackets and began firing.

Red pulses of light zipped through the air in all directions. Cooper pulled Gayle to the ground almost immediately, and like many of the others, they flopped on their stomachs and covered their heads. Some of the passengers and crew, however, began bounding off the walls like pinballs in a frantic attempt to run away. The main exit was blocked by the gun fighting men, and a sea of people barricaded the entry into the elevator.

Two of the soldiers went down immediately, deep burn wounds in their chests. The Gate Keepers did not relent at their passing, shooting at the other soldiers and the leader of the group in quick bursts. The remaining military men fired back as they retreated toward the exit door behind them. The first Gate Keeper to begin the battle, Daniel, fell in a heap with a dark red, furrowed ditch through the top of his head.

The four remaining Gate Keepers, with Ulrich in the rear, advanced on the soldiers with no fear. Ulrich, whose lanky frame often appeared too frail to withstand his own body weight, held his pistol firmly in front, his body now looking as solid as the hot steel. He fired continually into the soldiers, as did his companions. The man to the left of Ulrich fell, but they did not miss a beat. With no solid objects to hide behind, the soldiers were dropped in no time.

It took several moments to realize the gunfire was over. Ulrich and his men continued out through the exit doors and disappeared into Earth. As people began rising from the floor, it became clear that the combatants were not the only people injured. Several of her passengers were wounded or dead.

Gayle stood and moved to the center of the room to better assess the number of people who needed help. Like he was somewhere far away, she could hear Cooper calling for Zora to come down the elevator and bring her medical supplies.

The destruction around her felt so senseless. Gayle only hoped that it would one day be proven worth it.



Five of her passengers were dead. Gayle could hardly believe that the tarp covered lumps she'd seen back at the elevator had been aboard

her ship, alive, only hours before. They had been in her care, and she let them down. The outlines of their faces had been visible, and she could remember what each looked like.

The tall, raven-haired business woman was having considerable trouble concentrating on her conversation with an unpleasant looking policeman. She was glad Cooper and Norman were there to handle most of the questions. The sidelong glances and understanding expressions let her know that everyone thought she was in shock. Maybe she was.

The small conference room in which they sat was barely big enough for their group. The rectangular table in the middle, polished black steel, took up most of the space. Two chairs comfortably sat on both long sides of it. Behind Norman and Cooper, who were seated across from her, she could see her own reflection in the two way glass.

"So what you're telling me is that these men were military? U.S. Government?" the cop asked. His hair was buzz cut and he had a thin mustache. His green uniform, decorated with various metal badges and notices, fit tight around a middle that appeared to have seen more than its fair share of doughnuts.

Cooper nodded. "Yes. Military issue covert ops uniforms. Heston Colt assault rifles. The works."

In the confusion after the shooting stopped, more soldiers showed up and quickly extracted the bodies of their brothers. By the time the police arrived, there was no evidence that there had been a two sided shoot out.

"They may have looked military to you, but that's no proof. And I called the local Army base and they don't know anything about this," the policeman said, a touch of Ecuador in his voice.

Gayle couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Of course they wouldn't admit it if they did. The slaughter of innocent people doesn't usually go over well with the public."

"Pardon me ma'am," the cop said, that sympathetic look in his eyes. "But from what I'm hearing, passengers from your ship started the altercation."

She couldn't argue with that, though she wanted to desperately. "Trust us, these guys were from the military. We've seen them before," she said.

“How so?”

Cooper gave her a narrow eyed look that she understood completely. “Like you have. They walk the streets all over. Right?” He asked, looking to Gayle, who nodded.

Norman put a hand out to pause the conversation. “Someone from our passenger list did shoot first, but the others were on the ground when we arrived. Military or not, someone came and removed their bodies.”

The policeman made notes for several minutes on the photo sized tablet in his hands, shaking his head as he did so. Gayle didn't suppose the ramifications for her were dire, but she hated the idea of a story getting out that one of her passengers turned on the others. The truth wasn't such a great tale either, though.

“I'll need a copy of your ship manifest and any information you collected on your passengers,” the officer said.

Gerard Oliver, who had been in a closed meeting with several other detectives, stepped through the door. His silk suit, which had been pressed and perfect not long before, looked as rumpled as a used paper on a train. He shot Gayle a hateful look as he walked over to them.

His hands behind his back, the government envoy stopped beside the cop. “Are they still claiming that soldiers were involved in this?” he asked.

The policeman nodded, his eyes still trained on his report. “Yeah.”

“Oliver, go to hell. There is surveillance video that I'm sure will back our version of events,” Gayle said. Cooper again shot her an angry look, an obvious signal for her to be quiet. Reluctantly, she restrained herself.

Oliver laughed bitterly. “I saw no soldiers and I was here too, Ms. Darwin. And unfortunately, the cameras for the bay seemed to be malfunctioning. There is no tape.”

“You've got to be kidding,” Norman mumbled.

“Sorry. Technology has its limits,” Oliver said. “It seems this incident was simply a fight among your poorly chosen passenger list. You really must tighten your security. I'd hate for this to happen again.” He smiled snakelike at Gayle, shifting his eyes over to Cooper as well. “It's so bad for business.”

Gayle bit her lip and silently screamed a cacophony of curse words in her head at him. "Can we go now?" she asked.

The cop waved her off without looking up from his notepad. "Go ahead. I've got your contact information if I need you again."

She stared at him, her glare red hot, for several moments before she gave into Cooper's pull on her arm leading her into the afternoon air.



Cooper loved that everyday, good or bad, he seemed to learn something new about Gayle. Today, amid the deaths of several people, he had learned that she did not take guilt well. Huffing around with her brow furrowed and her eyes moist, she acted as though she'd never had to watch others suffer the consequences of her actions. He realized, of course, that she usually didn't have to face that music. If things kept going as they were, though, she'd be as old a pro at it as he was before long.

She also didn't take waiting very well when she was this agitated. She'd been on hold with Antwon Gardner's office for at least fifteen minutes. The recorded messages listing off various phone numbers to committees and complaint lines was almost encoded in his brain. He wasn't sure Gayle heard what was coming through the speaker at all.

"Can still hang up and he won't know the difference," Cooper said. He looked at the phone, sitting on the bed with the speaker phone button depressed and wished it would spontaneously disconnect.

"No," she said definitively.

Cooper had tried to talk her out of making the call for an hour while she ranted and raved about the Senator. In the end, he knew he had to give up or she would soon turn her anger on him. Not that he would blame her. He just didn't want to push it that far. Gardner deserved what he had coming to him.

Gayle bounced on the bed as she shifted, while Cooper paced in the narrow space between it and the dresser. This wasn't the nicest hotel in Ecuador, but right now, it didn't matter.

A soft click came from the phone and a female voice spoke. "I'll put you through to Senator Gardner now," the woman said, followed by another muted click. Cooper was glad the speakerphone allowed him to listen to both sides of what he imagined would be an interesting conversation.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Darwin. What can I do for you on a Saturday afternoon?" Gardner said, the rustle of wind bouncing off the phone.

Cooper could imagine the large, graying senator leaning back in a chase lounge chair and sipping a daiquiri on some private beach. Judging by the look on Gayle's face, she had a different picture of him in mind.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she ask, her rage barely contained.

Cooper cringed, and waited through Gardner's pause. "I'm trying to enjoy my day off, but I'm talking to you instead."

"Don't play dumb, Gardner. I know what you're up to," Gayle responded.

Gardner chuckled, an unhappy sound. "I assure you that I have no idea what you are talking about."

Gayle stood off the bed, taking the phone base with her. "You sent your military goons to the *Earth Elevator* today. Now five of my passengers are dead," she spat.

"I did no such thing—"

The irate woman interrupted him. "Did your lap boy, Oliver, tell you there were some rebels on board, or did he just ask you to come take me out?"

There was nothing he could do to control her, short of slapping her across the face and disconnecting the phone. Cooper had trouble letting the scene play out around him, but he knew that he needed to trust Gayle. Relying on other people did not come naturally to him.

Gardner cleared his throat after giving her a few moments of silence in case Gayle continued her tirade. "Ms. Darwin. I was not involved in whatever happened to your passengers today and I'm sorry to hear of it if anyone was hurt." He shifted on his end of the line. "You have anger for me and I think we both know why. You're not my favorite person either.

But I am not out to get you, and if something happened, I was not involved.”

“You’re a lying son of a bitch!” Gayle shouted.

The Senator sighed. “I’ll look into this matter. Good day,” he said, and hung up.

Gayle screamed a shrill, animal like yell and threw the phone against the wall.

Glad the call was over, Cooper unclenched his fists and exhaled a long-held breath. Gayle needed to make the call and blame someone. Unfortunately, calling Gardner and cussing him out had no hope of getting them any answers.

The dark-haired woman stood beside the bed for several moments, her body a tense ball of frustration. Her blue eyes were looking out the window, seeing nothing but whatever was flashing through her mind. As Cooper watched her, he spotted a small quiver in her lip and a breaking in her posture.

When she finally looked over to him, a sheen of tears in her eyes, he knew it was safe to move. The bigger man took three steps to her, and she launched her body into his arms. Her tears began to flow at once, short sobs wrenching from her throat.

“It’s okay,” Cooper whispered, doubting that it would be for a long, long time.