

Uninvited Guests

“My fellow Americans, thank you for joining me for another State of the Union address. This yearly forum is made possible only through your dedication to our democracy.”

President Marcus Porter stepped back from the podium in the Senate chamber to applaud the country, as well as his fellow politicians. The State of the Union address always took center stage in the United States' political arena, and this year was no different. Though most of the populous had no idea, the country was in great peril. The men in Washington were working feverishly to make sure that the situation stayed a secret.

Behind President Porter, the House Majority Leader and Vice President sat respectfully, eagerly applauding. Over one thousand elected officials and their families, as well as those who worked without public mandate behind the scenes, filled the large chamber. Those in the audience sat in the half moon rows of chairs that gave the spacious room a more closed in, intimate feeling. On the television, the setting looked much smaller than the thousands of square feet that it actually covered.

Each man and woman, including the President, was dressed in the most stylish clothes, had their faces touched up by the trendiest cosmetic coaches to look their best beneath the cameras, and had their hair cut in their favorite fashion. Despite his usual attempts to appear to be one of the people, the President wore an extremely rare silk suit, spun by worms extinct in only a few fabric houses, dyed a brilliant blue with silver piping. His white shirt and matching blue tie set him apart from the drab wood paneling behind him. His silver hair was combed back and slicked down.

“We are at an important moment in our history. The United States has spread its wings and is constantly soaring to new heights. We are a protector of the citizens of the world, far and wide. We have united the world into one planet of peace and harmony,” the President said, moving his gaze to all parts of his audience, as well as the television camera dead ahead.

The hall erupted in more applause. Not all of the elected men and women present were in the President's camp, but they all knew how important this yearly speech was for their system of government. It was a yearly ratification that the government was still run by the people, for the

people. The fact that the people had less influence than ever before didn't really matter, as long as it appeared nothing had changed.

A shuffle of activity and faint voices from outside filtered into the chamber as the President began to speak again. "In the past year, we have worked to solidify our promise to protect the world's population. A faction of radical terrorists in New Zealand were cleansed, freeing the quiet, traditional people of that country from instability."

Everyone clapped again to recognize the President's accomplishment. The Auckland Uprising had been a stain on the presidency early in the year. Images of regular citizens dying never went over well with the general population. Luckily for those in power, effective spinning seemed capable of fixing any public embarrassment.

The muted pop of automatic gunfire from somewhere beyond the room startled the President at the podium. He looked around the chamber, checking for the uniformed and plain-clothes security strategically placed throughout the audience. Everyone in the hall shifted, looking to the person next to them or beyond to gauge whether or not there was reason for alarm.

The President focused his gaze on the camera directly in front of him. Beside it, in front of two doors leading out of the room, were secret service agents dressed in plain black suits. Each man had one hand to his ear listening to a broadcast the President couldn't hear, and the other hand under their jacket pocket on their guns. No further sound emanated from the outer hall.

"This year, we have strengthened the Australian economy, taking the money out of the pockets of those who make it their goal in life to disrupt that state's transition into the world culture." With an unsteady, weathered hand, the President wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. He squinted ever so slightly to read the speech scrolling only for his eyes. "It has been a good year full of progress toward our ultimate goals. No evil forces on the planet are powerful enough to prevent what is just."

Before President Porter could accept the applause due him, a deafening roar filled the Senate chamber, followed by screams of fear. A military ramming vehicle, covered in plate steel with a pointed, ripping front grill, tore through the North wall. As men dressed in black trench coats poured out of the vehicle, more similarly dressed men flooded through every door. Within seconds, hundreds of dark assassins surrounded the chamber's occupants, laser rifles and pistols pulled and to the ready.

Though the cameras were still running, the President stood frozen, his hands gripping the podium in front of him with white knuckled strength. Only moments passed before one of the secret service or military men broke the peaceful coup with a shot fired into the sea of black coats. More screaming, yelling, and ducking behind chairs ensued, turning the peaceful gathering into a sea of chaos.

On television, the viewers saw the President blink in surprise, then duck down behind the podium, joining the Vice President and Speaker. Some networks switched to the scene of the Senate floor, which showed the doors being blocked, and some senators being shot down in bright blasts for trying to reach them. Only one network returned to their newsroom for commentary before the battle was over.

A Gate Keeper soldier, his shoulder length hair as black as his jacket, made his way through the cowering politicians to the dais. He held his pulse rifle at his front to discourage any sudden infusions of bravery. The three men hiding behind the podium did not appear to be a serious risk of becoming courageous. Nonetheless, he pointed the barrel at them and ordered them to scoot away. He then leaned forward toward the small microphone and tapped it, sending a gunshot like sound throughout the room.

The man cleared his throat before speaking. "In case you missed it, we're in control here. The more you resist, the more people die." He surveyed the room, where very little resistance remained. "If you all cooperate, you'll get to take a trip with us. It's time to change the world."



Considering that the train on which they were riding floated across the ground on a cushion of force field enclosed air, Gayle thought the ride should have been a lot smoother. Instead, they bounced and jostled through Equador, their heads bobbing with each dip. The train, which was shaped like a long bullet with round ceilings and cropped floors, moved along its reserved path with lightning speed. It covered the twenty mile distance from the airport to the elevator in only minutes.

Gayle sighed and leaned back against the worn cloth seat. The presence of Cooper by her side, as well as Zora, Alexa, and Norman, comforted her to some degree, but overall, the normally strong business woman felt as insecure as an injured deer being stalked by wolves. The

events of the previous night still replayed in her mind. The look on the President's face when the Gate Keepers invaded the Senate chamber had let her know that he, nor whoever else might be technically in charge of the government, had not expected their nemeses to strike so quickly or so hard. When the camera had switched to the Senate floor, where wealthy and powerful men and women were being killed, Gayle had been the one shocked.

"Hey," Cooper whispered, bumping his shoulder against hers and staying close.

She smiled at him, again reminded that while chaos was taking over in the world, all of her existence was not wrong. "Hi," she answered.

"You okay?"

"Sure," she said, feeling anything but okay. "I'm worried."

Cooper nodded, pulling his arm up and putting it around her shoulders. "Nothing we can do but react."

"React to what? We're going back up to the ship to make a delivery. That's not reacting. That's pretending that our government isn't crumbling," Gayle said.

"Not your fault," Cooper responded, tightening his grip on her.

But she felt like it was her fault. When the Gate Keepers had warned her that a war was about to begin, she didn't take it literally. Now that she could see that they intended to wage a real war, the actions she'd taken to help them over the last few months flashed through her mind bathed in traitorous red. She still believed that the government needed to fall, but knowing how direct a hand she'd had in it made her uneasy.

"I know," she said, burrowing further into Cooper's embrace.

The train swooshed into the station a minute later. Gayle and Cooper piled out with the rest of the passengers. Everyone formed a straight and orderly line and calmly shuffled out of the train. Stepping into the warm Ecuadorian sun, seeing an urban paradise littered with palm trees and sun tanned tourists, Gayle felt like she might pass out. Her life felt like it was turned upside down and swirling in a blender, yet the Earth continued to turn.

Their group of five walked beside the track, and then the street leading to the *Earth Elevator*, in silence. The sight of Zora and Alexa holding hands made Gayle smile a little. She wished they could just enjoy themselves, as she wanted to enjoy Cooper, without the world going crazy around them. Zora was wearing a set of old fashioned aqua scrubs, her hair tied into a ponytail that draped along the entire length of her back. Alexa had on faded blue jeans and a tight blue T-shirt. If not for her knowledge of their destination, someone on the street might think they were headed to the park for a quiet walk.

As laid back as Zora and Alexa appeared, Norman made up for in tenseness. He hadn't said two words to Gayle all day. In his gray and black uniform and scowl, he looked as rigid as she felt. Her guilt reflected back ten fold in his soft brown eyes. She had a feeling that no matter how this turned out, Norman would never forgive her for involving him in a plot against his government.

The *Earth Elevator* parking lot looked deserted. Only three cars were parked near the front entrance. On any normal day, there should have been fifty cars there. People should have been waiting for loved ones to return from one of the space stations or *Lunar One*, or making short trips into the elevator to send or pick up cargo.

No one said anything about the obvious irregularity. Gayle simply hoped that she was just being paranoid and there would be a logical explanation when they got inside. They strode quickly toward the building, which looked more like an office building than a hub into space. It stood three stories high and spanned an entire city block. The *Gossamer Wings* crew typically only saw the temporary cargo bay and the passenger lobby, but the building had numerous other storage areas and cargo holds.

Reluctantly, Gayle left the bright sunshine and entered the building with the rest. The halls were as empty as the parking lot as they made their way toward the first security checkpoint thirty feet within the structure. The desk and detector were unoccupied. The hospital white walls and ceiling leading into the heart of the portal gave Gayle a feeling that they were descending into something unusual.

The group passed the normal check points and proceeded into the lobby that adjoined to the administrative offices, the cargo bays, and the elevator. Two Gate Keepers sat in straight backed chairs near the control panel, their trench coats, hardly needed in this tropical paradise, bunched behind their knees. Both men, boys really, had stringy brown

hair that looked like it hadn't seen a shampoo bottle in ages. In their laps they held shiny black pulse pistols.

Cooper and Norman both demonstrated their manly bravado by assuming positions in front of the women. Gayle increased her pace to insert herself between them. The Gate Keepers showed no apprehension as the *Gossamer Wings'* crew approached.

"*Gossamer Wings?*" the dirty looking boy on the left asked.

When Cooper and Norman stopped ten feet in front of the men, Gayle took another step to position herself between them. "Yes. We're scheduled to move cargo to *Lunar One*" she said.

The stringy boy on the right shook his head, making his hair shimmer across his face. "Nope. We've got orders that you're supposed to wait here for Wizard St. James."

Taken aback by the boy's use of the word "wizard", Gayle fumbled for a response.

Cooper stepped up beside her. "What does he want with us?"

The kid shrugged. "I don't know. Wants something. More for the cause. You've got to stay here."

Gayle wanted to scream. She hadn't believed that they could just walk away from Ulrich and the Gate Keepers, but the wounds from last night's attack were too fresh.

"Let us go up to the ship," Cooper said, powerful menace in his voice.

The two so-called soldiers shrugged, and the spokesman pointed a thumb toward the elevator. "Go ahead. You can't go anywhere until the docking clamps are released," he said.

Cooper ushered her into the elevator, followed in a depressed procession by the rest of the crew.



"I can't believe this is happening," Gayle said. She paced across the berber carpeted floor of her quarters while Cooper sat calmly on the bed.

Gayle was still wearing the casual slacks and button up shirt she'd worn on the planet. Cooper, who had suggested that they work out and put on a pair of ratty shorts and sleeveless shirt, waited for her to calm down so that they could burn off some of their stress in the little gym.

"Nothing you can do about it," Cooper added.

He kept saying that, and Gayle knew his advice was well meant. She should have simply pushed the situation out of her mind and dealt with whatever was to come. Unfortunately, she wasn't wired that way. Her mind kept turning over her actions in her mind, and she wondered if anything she'd done in the last few months had been right. Now that she knew the ultimate outcome, she wasn't at all sure.

"I know. That doesn't mean it didn't happen." She stopped in front of the bed and faced Cooper, who leaned forward onto big hands placed beside each leg. "I've got every right to be upset. We're basically being held hostage, my father is probably in jail somewhere, who knows what kind of danger my mother is in, and Fifty is with her."

"They'll be okay."

Gayle shook her head. "I hope so, but I'm afraid something really bad is going to happen because of what I've done."

"Nothing is going to happen. And if it does, it won't be by your hand." He reached forward and took Gayle's hands in his, pulling her closer. "You need to quit blaming yourself."

She let him gently squeeze her hands for several moments, hoping he could move the bad thoughts out of her head. Then she sat down on the bed, her thigh touching his. "I'm not sure if I can. I never wanted this to happen."

"No one did," he said softly.

Gayle knew he was right. No one, probably not even the Gate Keepers, thought the conflict with the government would result in revolution. She wasn't sure the strange group that had taken over had pure, or sane, motives, but she was sure that they believed in themselves. They had aspirations other than money and power, and that was more than could be said for most of the current crown in Washington. There was nothing to do except hope for the best.

A brighter smile lit Gayle's face as she drew her eyes once again up to Cooper's. His were dark and light at the same time, a rich, golden brown that she had trouble giving a name. When she looked at him, she just knew that the person behind those beautiful eyes almost always knew the right thing to say, even if it wasn't what she wanted to hear.

Taking his hand, Gayle rubbed both the top and palm with her own slowly, feeling rough skin hewn by years of labor. "What would I do without you?" she asked.

Cooper shrugged, a smile quirking the right side of his lips in a slanted grin. "Don't' know."

"You're so humble," she said, chucking him in the arm from close range.

"Buy a punching bag," he added.

She playfully hit him again in the muscles leading up to his shoulder. "Nah, you're too fun to hit."

"That's not the first time I've heard that."

Gayle leaned toward him, reaching her hand up to his shoulder. She pulled him forward until he was face to face with her, then she closed the distance to engage him in a kiss. His lips felt softer than they looked. Cooper had a gentleness about him that she found incredibly alluring mixed with the remainder of his tough man persona.

The physical, at the moment, did not compare with the fact that Cooper had a great knack for taking her mind off subjects she'd rather not think about. All she could focus on was the way her heartbeat raced, and the feel of his hands as they danced over her sides and back. Her own hands ran through his short hair as their kissing turned from a soft touch to a passionate embrace. Before she realized she moved, she was in his arms and they were lying on the bed.

Cooper wanted this, and so did Gayle. She wanted to let go completely and surrender herself to him. She never was very good at giving up control. Domination seemed to be a protective mechanism for her. The fact that she couldn't dictate what would happen in the world ate at her constantly. Being in his arms, though, gave her the strength to forget about everything she couldn't influence, and even those she didn't want to influence.

Gayle pulled away from Cooper, his body arching up to follow her. She settled back on her haunches, perched atop his lap. His face, bright red showing through his copper skin, held a look of confusion. When she stripped her shirt over the top of her head and threw it in the floor, his smile returned.



Norman hated coming to the conference room. It seemed like ages since they'd met in there for anything other than bad news. Today they were meeting on the worst of news.

He leaned forward against the table on his elbows, the sleeves of his black jacket sliding against the metallic surface. His blonde hair was wet and not styled, a condition he rarely allowed in public. His heart didn't seem to be in worrying about his appearance for some reason.

The double door slid open, each side regressing into the wall, admitting Cooper and Gayle. Cooper wore faded blue jeans and a T-shirt stretched tightly over his large, muscular frame. Gayle was dressed in tan khaki slacks with a navy button up shirt, her hair pulled back in a ponytail. Big smiles covered both of their faces. The increasing closeness the two of them were sharing shined from them both like light from the sun.

Norman shook his head, wondering how much better his life could get. "Hello, you two," he said, no inflection in his voice.

They shifted their attention to him and offered greetings. Gayle took her customary seat at the head of the table and Cooper sat in the adjacent chair, opposite Norman. As she looked at Norman, Gayle's expression sobered. "Norman, I'm sorry I got you involved in this," she said.

The apology, unexpected, touched the pessimistic Captain. "Thank you. I don't know how to deal with this."

"Neither do I," she replied, shaking her head. "I didn't foresee this, nor do I approve."

Norman nodded, and tried to put his feelings into words. When none came, he said, "I can only hope that some good comes out of it."

The door behind them opened again and Ulrich walked into the room. As usual, he wore a black shirt and pants, though his ever present trench coat was missing. His pigeon face looked more lively than usual. More color filled his cheeks and Norman thought he might be able to see the hint of a smile in the man's dark eyes.

"The man of the hour," Gayle said, no levity in her voice.

"Hello everyone," Ulrich greeted them. He moved to the far end of the table, putting four chairs on either side between them, and sat down at the head.

Gayle leaned forward on the surface. "What and the hell are you people doing?"

Ulrich didn't react to the sting in her words. "Exactly what I told you we would do. We are securing the second half of the device."

"You never told me that you would overthrow the government," she said, her voice raised an octave.

"You never asked."

Pounding her fist on the table, Gayle looked as though she might fly over the obstacle and strangle Ulrich. "That's bullshit and you know it. I expected at most a small scale terrorist attack or a military battle. I didn't know you had designs on taking over the world."

Ulrich frowned and shook his head. "We don't want to take over the world, Gayle, I assure you. Nothing has changed about our mission. Everything we are doing is to keep a powerful device from the hands of those who would misuse it."

"How does dissolving the government do that?" Gayle asked, a pleading in her voice.

"I didn't make the decision to storm the capitol, so I really couldn't say. We need information, though, and I think this move was meant to extract that information. All I can tell you is that we need you now, more than ever," Ulrich said.

Gayle leaned back in her chair and ran a hand over her mouth. "I don't know. I don't know what to think." She looked first to Cooper, then to

Norman. "One thing I do know is that I cannot in good conscience continue to force my crew to participate in this alliance."

Ulrich shrugged. "We would welcome any of your crew to assist in this important cause, but we do not force anyone. We only really need your cooperation."

The man's words weren't framed as a threat against Gayle, but Norman wondered what they would do if she chose not to cooperate.

"I'll help you," she said, a heavy, resigned look weighting her beautiful features. "I've done too much not to see this through."

A smile, the first Norman could remember seeing on Ulrich's dour countenance, broke free from his lips. "Good. Others will arrive soon and there will be cargo for you."



Gayle didn't know if she really wanted to see Ulrich's cargo. She was afraid she might already know what it was. Nonetheless, she and her two faithful body guards, Norman and Cooper, were trudging toward a cargo bay where they were told Ulrich and his mystery were waiting. With so few crew members on board, the halls of the *Gossamer Wings* were deadly silent. The lighting, though set at the same level as it had been since the ship launched, seemed subdued. A shadow fell on every surface.

She was glad that her core crew was with her, and had stuck beside her during this ordeal. Norman had his reservations, but he was in it for the long haul. Cooper, she believed, would suffer her anything at this point. Zora, Alexa, and Ricardo were also still aboard, willing to face what storms may come. The business woman hoped to mitigate the damage by any means possible, but she had no idea what the future held.

Hitting the button beside the cargo bay door triggered it open. A low rumble of voices came over the air before she could see inside. As the darkened metal doors opened, they revealed a throng of men in suits on the far end, and Gate Keepers in their black overcoats blocking the distance. Antwon Gardner, standing several inches taller than most of his colleagues, stood out to Gayle immediately.

"Oh my God," she whispered. Seeing her cargo bay full of the kidnapped politicians, she knew that if the Gate Keepers did not succeed in their

mission and a new government was not established, she was destined for the death penalty.

Ulrich stepped away from his fellow Gate Keepers, his face an emotionless mask. "I suppose I don't need to tell you what the cargo is at this point."

"I wish you hadn't done this," Gayle said.

Ulrich shrugged. "What's done is done. It will turn out for the best. Let me introduce you to the Grand Wizard."

Gayle would normally be alarmed by someone being introduced as the "Grand Wizard." At the moment, the numb feeling making her toes and fingers tingle did not let any new emotions compete. Ulrich stepped to the middle of the room and motioned her to follow, which she did without thought. They stopped in front of a group of five Gate Keepers. All but one wore their familiar non-uniform uniform. The standout wore a gray robe and a rounded cloth hat. His thin white hair flowed wildly down to his shoulders. A matching white beard covered his face.

"This is Grand Wizard Euroken Boe," Ulrich said, motioning to the man.

If she had been told at that moment that they were actually in an old science fiction movie, Gayle wouldn't have been surprised. She offered her hand. "Gayle Darwin."

Wizard Boe shook her hand and smiled under his layer of facial fur. "We appreciate the assistance you have given in this quest," he said in a thick Australian accent, his voice deep and booming.

"Honestly, I'm not sure I've done the right thing," she said.

The tall, white-haired man put his hand on her shoulder. "We've asked much of you, I know, and this is in opposite to your love of your country." With his other hand, he pointed to the captured politicians. "What we do here, however, is beyond countries and patriotism. All that will be resolved and the governments of Earth will come out the better for it. Our mission is much larger."

"We've got to do all this for faster than light travel?" she asked.

Making a face she couldn't quite interpret, the Wizard thought for a moment, then nodded. "In a sense, yes." He patted her on the shoulder. "All your questions will be answered soon," he said.

Gayle got the peculiar feeling that he could read her mind. She only hoped he would eventually answer the questions she was asking.



Not being one to back down from confrontation, Gayle hated to admit that she was apprehensive about what she needed to do. The weight of her predicament kept beating on her like she was an abused stepchild. There was absolutely no reason to look forward to meeting with Antwon Gardner. He was intimidating enough to speak with on the phone, much less when he was a hostage on her ship.

Gayle stared at the door to the small crew quarters where they had him confined. The small rooms were much like cells, and may have been smaller than many cells in prisons back on Earth. She was glad that the Gate Keepers had been at least reasonable enough to let their captives have a place to rest.

Knowing her fate was long sealed, the businesswoman took a deep breath and entered her password in the keypad beside the door. With a click and a swoosh, it slid open. Gardner was lying on the bed, his feet completely sticking off the end of the short mattress. He raised his head to look at her, his eyes puffy from fitful sleep. The Senator showed no surprise that she was disturbing him.

“What do you want?” he said, his head falling back into his pillow, which looked miniature because of his size.

“I just wanted to check on you,” she said.

He sat up, his arms firmly planted on either side, when she took a step to fully enter the little room. “I’m touched that you care,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Gayle shook her head. “I do care,” she said. She fidgeted with her hands where she clasped them at her front. “This wasn’t my idea.”

“How are you involved in this?” Gardner asked, his eyes filled with anger.

“I wish I could tell you. I kind of just fell into it.”

“Do you know why they’ve kidnapped us?” he asked.

Gayle looked away for a moment, then back to his intense eyes. "The Gate Keepers are looking for something they claim the government can't be allowed to have."

"What?"

"I'm not sure what it is," she answered.

The Senator stood to his full, imposing height and stepped toward her. For a moment she wondered if he would attack her and try to escape. He knew as well as she did, though, that there was no where for him to go.

"I never took you for a terrorist, Darwin," he said.

"I'm not a terrorist any more than you are. I'm just trying to do what's best for my fellow citizens."

He growled indignantly. "You are conspiring with known terrorists. If you truly believe that is best for the citizens of the United States, you have gone outside your senses."

Gayle shook her head, feeling her own body bowing with angry tension. "I am not conspiring with anyone. I'm—I'm part of a long overdue revolution."

"Revolution? You've got to be kidding. This is not a revolt of the people. They are too prosperous to have any such desire."

"You've been listening to the propaganda for too long, Gardner. There are millions oppressed by your government and you know it. You'll never admit it, but this change has been needed for a long time," Gayle said. No matter how nervous she was about how things had happened, she truly believed that her intentions were noble.

The Senator's jaw clenched as he stared her down. "Say what you must to convince yourself that this is not a treasonous act."

"It may be treason against your government, but not against the people who've suffered under it. If the Gate Keepers prevail, we'll be able to build something new." She stepped away to the door and looked at Gardner as he sat back on the bed, defeated. "I long for a government and a way of life I've never known. This government was once founded on freedom and opportunity for everyone. People with money have

been pulling the strings to their own advantage for far too long. I plan to see this through so that we can all have what we deserve.”