

## Questions Answered

A plentiful field of stars stretched out in front of the *Gossamer Wings*, providing a clear invitation to run. Gayle wished she could. She'd take the ship and point it to the nearest distant star and hope for the best. The alternative, remaining attached to Earth and the turmoil rumbling on the surface, was not much better than a probable future of starvation, suffocation, and hypothermia.

Gayle stared out of the control deck window knowing that she was set in her course no matter how much she wished there was another good option. With so much negative going on around her, she tried to concentrate on the positive aspects of her life, though she didn't count optimism as her strong suit. She still had her crew, at least the core of it, and a few others to run the ship. Cooper had not yet dumped her and moved on to a younger, less rebellious woman. And the ship was still hers, although she couldn't really control it at the moment.

She tried to forget the bad things. The first bad—horrible—thing on her agenda was the fact that the President and a few dozen senators were being held captive in the crew quarters. Next on the list had to be the world war that seemed to be breaking out on Earth. And the third biggie was that China seemed poised to make a move to take over the United States' territory.

Gayle thought her day could be better.

The double doors to the epicenter of the ship swooshed open behind her. Gayle turned to see who was brave enough to join her. To her disappointment, Ulrich entered the room wearing his normal dour expression. She didn't dislike the man as much as she wished she'd never met him.

"Hello, Ms. Darwin," he said in his faint Australian accent.

"Hey," Gayle responded, crossing her arms over her chest. "What do you need?"

Ulrich shrugged uncharacteristically and a foreign smile formed on his lips. "Many things."

"Don't we all," she responded.

"You're not pleased," he observed flatly.

Gayle shook her head and couldn't help smiling sadly herself. "That's true. There is a lot to be displeased about."

"We trust that the Gate Keepers will prevail."

His unflinching faith was one of the most disturbing traits she had noticed in Ulrich. Gayle rarely trusted faith that strong. "Well, how are they prevailing with their captives?"

"Our guests have not been as helpful as we had hoped."

Gayle could feel her temperature begin to rise. "You'd better use some of your magic on them, then. This can't all be for nothing."

"It won't be, but we can't use magic to help. It doesn't work that way," he said.

Shaking her head, Gayle had no trouble believing that the Gate Keepers' magic couldn't help them. That would be too easy. "What are you going to do?"

Ulrich shrugged. "Keep questioning them, I suppose."

"Do you mean torturing them?" Gayle asked. A horrific picture of the President being beaten filled her head. She didn't like the man and hoped for his departure from the presidency, but he was more than just a man. Gayle had no desire for the office of the president to be devalued.

"I hope it doesn't come to that," Ulrich replied. "Our only other alternative is to search each secure site systematically until we find the artifact."

"Why not do that?" she asked.

Frowning, the man in black swayed on his feet. "That could result in significant loss of life for both sides. The military does not leave those locations unprotected."

Gayle hadn't thought of that possibility. She just wanted another plan besides what they were currently doing. It felt completely wrong. "You have a point."

Ulrich looked down at the floor in front of her, as if he were ashamed to meet her eyes. "If there is anything you can do, your help would be appreciated."

Given her failed political career, Gayle didn't think it was very likely that she could make much headway with the politicians. "I'll see what I can do," she said, knowing that the odds were against her.



With so few crew on the ship and all of their guests confined to quarters or hanging out in the cargo bays, Alexa had no idea why it hadn't occurred to her to hold her little shindig in the cafeteria. Instead, she, Zora, Alexa, and Cooper were stuffed into Alexa's room for dinner and movie night. When Gayle had told her that they all needed a distraction, she had immediately thought of inviting Gayle and Cooper to her place for a nice little meal and a movie. She would have invited Ricardo as well, but he was deeply involved in some engine maintenance. She supposed she could later set up something for everyone where they had a bit more space.

Cooper and Gayle were sitting on the floor together, leaning against the open side of the bed. He was wearing his typical sleeveless black T-shirt and cotton shorts, showing many of his bulging muscles. Gayle looked like a school teacher in her collared shirt and slacks. If Alexa didn't know them, she wouldn't guess Cooper and Gayle were two people who would socialize, much less fall in love.

Yet apparently, they had. The subtle glances she might not have noticed a week ago were now full on, adoration filled stares. They didn't sit shoulder to shoulder like friends or crewmates. Cooper ran his arm along the top of the bed and Gayle was sitting tucked snugly against his body. A couple of times since they'd been in her room, she'd noticed Gayle put her head on his shoulder.

Seeing Gayle in love was somewhat disconcerting. Though she'd known the business woman during her relationship with Rick Malloy, running into them together a few times, she'd never seen the strong woman making goo-goo eyes at him. Not that there was anything wrong with that. She was glad that Gayle was happy.

Alexa wanted to be happy herself, but she couldn't seem to forget about her own crippled love life and her inability to let go of her fears. She

wanted to let go and give herself a chance to love more than anything. It had been a long time since she had a legitimate opportunity to allow for that possibility.

“Are you going to bring that popcorn or not?” Zora called from her place on the bed.

Alexa smiled and began pouring a pouch of the puffy white finger food into a bowl. “I’m coming, I’m coming.”

She handed one bowl to Cooper and one to Zora as she hopped onto the bed. The doctor was reclining against the wall, her feet sticking off the far side of the bed. The thin blue pants and soft cotton shirt she wore looked like pajamas. She had a lazy smile on her face that likely hid some smart comment she was cooking up for later.

“Computer, start the movie,” Alexa said.

Everyone groaned.

“No, no,” Zora surged toward the night table and picked up the remote control. “You’re the most technologically deficient person ever.”

Chuckling, Alexa settled down on the bed beside her friend. “Thanks for the compliment.”

Zora gave her a playful evil eye as she pulled up the movie menu on the screen. “You have to say ‘resume play’ or it starts over at the beginning,” she said.

“I forgot,” Alexa said, smiling.

“If the world wasn’t sliding into war and we weren’t involved in a conspiracy, I’d be upset enough by this to have you whipped by my flunkies,” she said, motioning toward Gayle and Cooper. “For now, I’ll forgive you.”

“Very magnanimous of you,” Gayle said, her mouth full of popcorn.

Zora took only a few moments to get the film started from where they had paused it for Alexa to get the snack. It was a drama they all agreed was a great diversion about the triumph of the first astronauts to fly to Mars. Best of all, it had a great story that could divert them from thinking about the situation currently keeping everyone on extreme edge.

The doctor said that the movie was her favorite and she watched it as if that were true. Her dark eyes concentrated on the screen, her mouth set in a determined clinch. She really was quite beautiful. Her slightly almond shaped eyes gave her an exotic look, like an Asian warrior. She carried a bit more weight than necessary, but not so much so that she appeared unhealthy. Zora always looked like she was ready for anything.

Alexa sighed softly and moved her eyes back to the screen. The movie rolled by without her really noticing. She knew that if she kept telling herself that she wasn't ready for a relationship with Zora, she'd never let herself be ready. The fear of failure, and retribution, and reprisal stood in her way like a blockade wall. Her heart told her that there wasn't anything wrong with loving Zora, or being in love with her. If some people in the world didn't like it, big deal. If they tried and it didn't work out, they really didn't have anything to lose. There was no going back to the way she had perceived things before.

Turning back to Zora, Alexa knew what she wanted. She wanted to share her entire life with the amazing person she called her best friend. Zora would never hurt her purposefully, and she would shield her from any harm that might come their way. Alexa doubted that she could ever find a better protector.

Without giving herself any more time to think about it, Alexa leaned toward Zora and lifted her hand to the woman's face. As a question formed on the doctor's lips, Alexa covered them with her own. Frozen at first, Zora's dark eyes were as big as compact disks. It only took her a few moments to recover, though, and she returned the kiss with the soft passion in which it was given.

When Alexa pulled away, Zora's eyes were closed and a smile quickly spread across her face. Alexa lowered her head to the doctor's shoulder and stretched out on the bed to watch the movie.



Gayle took a deep breath as the door in front of her slid open. On the small bed opposite her laid President Marcus Porter. His eyes popped open as she stepped into the small space and he sat up quickly to greet her. His raven hair was unordered and his eyes were weary and blood shot. A dark red patch covered his left cheek and a small rent marred his lower lip.

“You coming to get in on the action too?” he asked, his raspy voice full of contempt. He moved his hand up to his jaw and rubbed it.

Though she did not believe that this man was a good president, or even one elected by the true will of the people, she had no desire to see him battered aboard her ship. “No. What have they done?”

“Not their worst yet. If you don't want to add murderer to your list of crimes, you should let me go,” he said.

“They won't kill you,” Gayle responded, wondering if the statement was true.

The President leaned forward on his hands and chuckled. “I'm glad you're confident in that.”

“What is so important about this artifact that you are willing to go through so much to keep it from them?” she asked. She had no illusion that he would tell her the real answer.

“I don't know,” he said, stressing each word. “I've seen this artifact they're asking about and it just looks like an old sculpture to me.”

Gayle wanted to be awed by his presence. She wanted to be overwhelmed by patriotism and a desire to help him escape. Some deeply ingrained message within her psyche told her she should do anything she could to aid her country, and by extension, its president. The innate selfishness that screamed to her from President Porter's core cooled any such desires she may have normally had. No matter what he said to her, deep down she believed that he was covering for his own interests and those of his powerful friends.

“The Gate Keepers tell me that the relic can enable intergalactic travel,” Gayle said.

The President laughed, a high pitched, screech owl sound. “They've got you fooled, then.”

“I doubt that. You've taken a beating for whatever you think the thing does.”

He pointed emphatically down the hall. “I've taken a beating because those bastards wanted to give it. I can't tell them things I don't know.”

The little voice inside her that wanted to believe him finally went silent. "I don't endorse this, Mr. President, but I can't stop it. I suggest that you tell them what they want to know, because they will get it somehow."

Gayle turned and left the leader of the world alone, locked in the smallest room on her ship.



Gayle drummed her fingers on the conference room's steel table, a million scenarios running through her head. There had to be some other way for the Gate Keepers to find the artifact instead of this cruel offensive they were conducting. She had asked Wizard Boe to meet her to discuss the situation.

When the leader of the Gate Keepers walked through the door, she almost didn't recognize him. His dress was far from wizardly and he nearly looked like a normal man. He wore a pair of standard issue slacks and a tan button-up shirt. He had his white hair pulled back into a ponytail and his beard looked more ordered than the first time she had seen him. The wizard looked cleaned up enough to go work in an office.

"Ms. Darwin," he greeted her.

Gayle could not resist the urge to stand in his presence. "Thank you for meeting me," she said, motioning to the chair opposite hers.

"Our progress is rather slow, so a few minutes away will not hurt."

They both sat, the Wizard leaned back in the cushioned chair, Gayle leaned forward with both arms resting on the surface of the table. "That's what I'm here to talk to you about. I'm not sure I'm comfortable with the President of the United States being tortured on my ship."

He showed a small smile through his beard. "You have noble intentions, but need to build your resolve to see them through," he said.

"No offense, Wizard, but I'm not here for a lecture from you. I just need to make sure that what is going on here is absolutely necessary."

"I assure you that we will do only what we must and no more. The Gate Keepers get no pleasure by inflicting pain."

Gayle grasped her hands together even tighter. "I should hope not, but I'm beginning to wonder."

"We only want what you want." The older man bent forward and rested on the table. "The United States government as it now exists must be replaced. Your country deserves a balanced and fair administration. The rest of the world deserves to be free."

Gayle shook her head, wanting to believe him. "What does the artifact have to do with that?"

"The government would abuse the power both sides would sway. They would use it for other than its intended purpose."

"As it's going, China will be ruling us all before long," Gayle said.

The Wizard shrugged. "Such a result would not be worse than the current situation."

Gayle felt her face crunch in a frown. The thought of her government falling, right or wrong, because of her actions, was sickening. "We're not talking about your country."

"No, my country has already fallen. It has nothing to lose," he said.

Knowing she couldn't argue with him on that point, she decided to take another track. "I still don't understand what is so important about this magic. If it was all powerful, you wouldn't need me to do your dirty work."

Wizard Boe arose from his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked at her for several moments, his face a mask of fatherly wisdom, before he spoke. "No, you don't understand, but I can show you. Gather those you hold close and meet me back here in an hour. I will enlighten you."

Gayle watched him disappear into the hall with his graceful, ageless stride. She wanted to know the truth; to know if what she was helping them do was worthwhile. Somehow, though, she was afraid that the answers he offered to give her were more than she could bear.



Six months ago, Gayle would have laughed at the idea of having the meeting she was about to have with her captain. Nonetheless, she was about to meet to tell him that people were torturing the President in their hold and they were supposedly about to learn the secrets of magic from a Wizard. It would have been hilarious if it weren't so insanely real.

She sat in her office chair facing Cooper, who reclined comfortably on her couch. She was glad he was with her, though she wasn't completely sure his presence would make the meeting with Norman go smoother. It seemed that their relationship was more cordial than it had been. Gayle had seen them making security sweeps together. She doubted that Norman was completely over the animosity he had against Cooper because of his closeness to her, however.

Norman signaled his arrival through the locking system computer and Gayle opened the door for him. He wore his normal gray slacks and black shirt, and his short blonde hair was slicked back with styling gel. He looked as prim and proper as he had on their maiden voyage.

"Hi Norman," she greeted him.

The Captain nodded to her and Cooper. "Hello. What's going on?"

He had no idea how complicated of a question that was. "I wish I knew," she said. "Please have a seat," she said, pointing to the couch.

Norman obliged her and sat beside Cooper. "Why do I think I'm not here for good news?"

"Because you're a smart man," Gayle said, shaking her head. She hated doing this. Norman would not take the news well. "We're due for a strange meeting with Wizard Boe shortly, but I wanted to talk to you guys first. There's something going on that you should know about." Gayle took a deep breath and looked them both briefly in the eyes. "You know of the politicians that are here and I think we can guess what the Gate Keepers are trying to do."

"Need information," Cooper said.

"Yes," Gayle confirmed. "And to get that information, they're using means that aren't too pleasant." She swallowed and tried to formulate her thoughts. When she couldn't come up with anything soothing, she said what was on her mind. "I met with President Porter earlier and he

had obviously been beaten. The Gate Keepers are willing to use torture to extract the information they want.”

Norman's face immediately turned a bright crimson and he rocketed up from the couch. “The bastards. They can't treat the President of the United States like that. I don't care what they're looking for.”

Gayle stepped forward and put her hands on his shoulders. “Norman, calm down. I think this is just as wrong as you do, but there's nothing we can do to stop it.”

“The hell there isn't. We're in control of this ship right now. We can take them wherever we want,” he said.

“Think about what you're saying. They've got dozens of armed guards in the crew quarters and cargo bays. We're as much prisoners as our politician friends.” Gayle patted him on the shoulder and stepped away. She thought the world of Norman, but he wasn't always rational.

“No sign that they're willing to kill them,” Cooper said. “We need to do what we can to get the stuffed shirts to cough up the info. Otherwise, ride it out.”

Norman turned his crystal blue eyes back to Gayle, and she could see a deep regret in them. “Gayle, we've got to do something. We can't let this go on.”

She shook her head. “Yes we can, and we will. It's already too late to save our own skins in this. We've got to see it through and hope that the result is just. If this works out, our government could come out of it as strong as it's ever been.”

“What if you're wrong?” he asked, his voice pained. “What if all we get out of this is a new set of Chinese rulers or the death penalty?”

“I guess that's the chance we're taking,” she said.



When Gayle, Cooper, and Norman walked into the conference room, Ulrich and Wizard Boe were already waiting. They sat at the far end of the oblong table, a large, worn book covering the surface in front of them.

The two Gate Keepers, both silent and solemn, looked like children with a secret that they knew they had to tell, but would result in punishment.

Gayle sat in her customary chair at the head of the table, crossing her hands and leaning on her elbows as her companions took their seats. The moment seemed like it should have been happening in a church or senate chamber. She was about to learn something momentous, at least she hoped, and there should have been more pomp to mark the occasion. Then again, perhaps the lack of celebration was there to clue her in to the total lack of credibility of the presenters in which she was putting so much faith. Gayle wished she knew.

"Thanks for coming," Wizard Boe said casually in his Australian accent. "It's time you all learned the truth of the movement you've done so much to further."

"I'm hoping you're going to make all my doubts disappear. We've all sacrificed greatly for a cause we apparently know little about," Gayle said.

"Yes, and for your own cause," the Wizard pointed out.

Gayle nodded, acknowledging that she too had an agenda. "So what's the secret?"

Boe pursed his lips together and steeped his fingers as he seemed to think about how to begin. "The history books of mankind have always been subject to manipulation. In the last three hundred years, for example, they have been made to say that the countries of the world have banded together to form a voluntary community of equal nations. All of us in this room, however, understand that the United States has led an aggressive assault on the world and forcibly assimilated the once independent nations now under its umbrella. As has always been the case, the known story of man has been written and propagated from the most prominent and powerful point of view. The history of American imperialism would have been written very differently from the perspective of Australians." Wizard Boe shared a look with Ulrich.

"Manipulation of history began much earlier than that story, however. For centuries—millennia—history has been written by typical humans like you three." The Wizard pointed to Gayle, Cooper, and Norman. They all looked at each other quizzically. "You're wondering why I have put you in a category apart from Ulrich and myself. What makes you different, you ask? I'll show you."

The tall, white-haired man stood from the table and held his hands in front of him as if he were waiting to catch a ball. Gayle's eye didn't perceive it immediately, but as it built, she could see a globe of light forming between Boe's palms. Within seconds, a light as bright as an antique light bulb shined in front of his body. He pulled one hand away, the ball of light following, and held it palm up as if offering it as a gift.

"There are those who have been here since the beginning of man with special skills not explainable by the rest. Some have called them witches and warlocks. Others have been called elves. The rest were likely called demons. Their skills vary, but they have always been different from the majority of man."

Gayle couldn't take her eyes off the beacon in Boe's hand. Her mind understood what she was seeing, and she accepted the inexplicable truth of his power. The distraction seemed to focus her mind on the abstract concept without letting her question the strange tale being woven around it. A surprising disappointment filled her when the light finally winked out.

"My people, the Eadokin, learned long ago that we had to conceal our uniqueness or risk persecution." He shook his head as a sad expression overtook his weathered face. "Still, the simple minds around my ancestors seemed to sniff out the difference, and we were not allowed to rest.

"Finally, after their community was grouped tightly together and of one mind, they chose to use their massed power granted by the Master Creator and leave."

Gayle realized that she was leaning forward on the table, her full attention riveted on Wizard Boe. "Where?" she asked, as eager as a child hearing a fairy tale.

"We know not the name of their destination, nor exactly where it is. The Great Book only tells us that it is another planet among the stars, not dissimilar to Earth." The old man patted the cover of the book. Despite its ancient appearance, no dust flew from the leather. "Our elders used a powerful spell to open a portal to this other world, where they knew they could be free."

"Then how are you here?" Norman asked, his voice openly skeptical.

"Some stayed behind."

"Seems like they'd want to go if things were so bad," Norman said.

The Wizard shrugged. "It can be hard to make a man leave his home. As a soldier, you know that. When nothing else in the world seems worthwhile, a person might always fight for their home."

Gayle ran a hand across her forehead, trying to keep her head from exploding. "So you need the artifact because you want to join them now?"

"Yes and no. We want the artifact because we want them to come back to their rightful home."

"How do you know they want to come back here? Maybe Planet X is a paradise," she said.

Boe nodded and rubbed his fingers across the soft cover of the book. "That could very well be." He looked from her to the tome. "But they left this here. It can only be used from one side of the portal."

Understanding dawned in Gayle's overstressed mind. "Why now?"

"Because after the first artifact was found, the United States government began attempting to obtain the other and the book. We have secured two of the three pieces and now seek to find them all to ensure their safety."

There was a certain far away quality in his eyes she recognized. "That's not all," she said.

Taking a deep breath, he shook his head. "No, it's not. The book speaks of the elders returning when the time is right for them to gain enough power to secure rights for our people. I think that time is now. My people want to return home."

Gayle looked to Cooper and their eyes met in silent understanding. Her brain continued to try to wrap itself around the Wizard's story. The evidence she'd seen of magic so far was compelling. The world as she knew it contained many technological wonders that could leave a person's head spinning. The magic she had been shown eclipsed anything she had seen before. The origins and implications were astounding.

At last, Gayle found the lucidity to speak. "I don't know if we should help you."

Wizard Boe looked at each of them. "That is your choice."