

Battleship Down

Rushing into the control room, Gayle looked to the monitor to see what was attacking her ship. A steel gray gunship covered the monitor, its proximity lights blinking off and on like a threat, warning that it meant business. The military vessel was smaller and sleeker than the *Gossamer Wings*. The Air Force used the ships to patrol Mars for the most part, but the government truly created them as a protection force for threats not yet recognized.

The *Gossamer Wings* was in serious trouble. First, they were attached to the *Earth Elevator* and had no way to avoid the aggression of the other ship. Even if they got away, they had no weapons to battle the other ship's guns, which likely fired a combination of pulse cannons and missiles. They would only be able to out maneuver them for a short while.

Gayle strode forward to the banks of computers. She could feel the press of everyone ease as they disbursed into the control room. Norman moved to his normal position, sitting in his chair and getting his computer into the navigation program.

Gayle called through the ship's communication system down to the Gate Keeper's on the surface. "Elevator, you need to remove the locks on the docking clamps."

There was no immediate response. "I—I don't know if I can do that," came an unsure voice.

"If you don't release us, you'll have nothing to hold onto," she said angrily. She cast a glance back to Ulrich, who was bracing himself against the back wall.

"Release the vessel," Ulrich directed to his compadre.

The Gate Keeper at the other end of the comm rustled with his computer. A second later, the magnetic plates of the docking clamps disengaged with little sound other than a momentary scrape of metal. The people aboard the ship felt only a minute swaying.

Gayle turned to Norman. "Get us out of here," she said.

Norman hopped from his captain's chair to the navigation station in front of it. With a few maneuvers of the hand mouse, he had the ship moving away from Earth and the military vessel.

"They're just going to follow us," Norman said when he was done.

Gayle shook her head. "I know. But this gives us a little time to think."



"We can go to Mars," Ulrich said.

Gayle and Norman looked his way with dour expressions. They'd been talking for five minutes about how they could combat the ship chasing them. "No, we can't," Gayle said. "We don't have enough fuel or supplies on board, but even if we did, they'd just nab us once we got there."

Norman knew the general capabilities of the vessel following them. It was a scaled down battle ship, sleek enough for fast maneuvering, but large enough to carry serious fire power. It would probably be carrying enough fuel to go all the way to Mars, needing less than the large *Gossamer Wings*. The former military man knew that his ship did not have one advantage over its foe.

He was glad that Gayle recognized these limitations. Having to convince her would have complicated the situation, in which they needed to think fast. Unfortunately, good ideas were not easily flowing.

They remained in the control room, computers and work stations surrounding them, though the computer was capable of continuing their route. Their evasion tactics were limited, but if needed, Norman would take over and try to keep them from getting killed.

"Could we ram them to disable the ship?" Ulrich asked.

"No!" Gayle exclaimed.

Norman understood her reaction. "No. Their ship is smaller, but more tightly built. Any collision would cause massive damage to the *Gossamer* and we'd be lucky to do anything at all to them."

The monitor in front of Norman flashed up a message. "They're hailing us," Norman said.

"Put it on the monitor and answer," Gayle told him.

Gerard Oliver's weasel head popped up on the screen. "Gossamer, stand down and allow your ship to be boarded."

"You've got to know we're not willing to do that," Norman responded.

Oliver smiled. "You have no choice. You can't run forever."

"What do you want?" Gayle asked.

"Don't play stupid, Darwin," Oliver said. "We know you have the President and Senators. It's time you paid for your crimes."

Norman had always hated Oliver being on the ship. Though he held none of Gayle's prejudices against the man simply because he worked for the government, Norman had always found him to be unpleasant to be around. He had the air of a prison snitch.

"Maybe we can work out a deal," Norman said. All he knew to do at this point was to buy time.

Oliver slammed his fist against something outside of the camera's vision. "There is nothing to compromise. You have nothing with which to bargain. Stop the ship and surrender your hostages."

"You're wrong. We do have something to bargain with. Our lives and the lives of the people you want." Norman punched a key and ended the call.

Gayle looked at Norman for a few moments, and he knew she was calculating how deep his threat had been. No one wanted to lose their lives in this situation, but it truly was the only card they had to use.



"We're dead in the water," Norman said, concentrating his glare on Wizard Boe.

The Great Wizard stood in the control room, which was acting as a conference area for him, Ulrich, Gayle, Cooper, and Norman. They stood in a circle in the middle of the room, surrounded by computer stations. Gayle had called everyone there for a meeting to decide if there was anything they could do to counteract their pursuers. The military vessel was matching their speed, shadowing every move, apparently waiting for the *Gossamer* to give up or give out.

"This ship has no weapons capability," Gayle said to Boe. "We're for transport only. Even if we had wanted weapons, I'm sure the government wouldn't have allowed it. As far as we knew when we were in construction, there was no potential need for weapons."

The Wizard stroked his long, flowing white beard. "Can any weapons be fashioned with materials currently on board?"

Norman shook his head and began shifting nervously on his feet. "Ricardo doesn't think so. We might be able to make some kind of mine, but we've got no way to hit them with it."

"And they've got plenty of fire power. We try any crude gun we can come up with, and they'd hit us with missiles and lasers before we could determine if our attempts were successful," Gayle added.

Shaking his head, the Wizard's face crunched in displeasure. In his usual way, he paused to contemplate his next words. "Then there is no way to fight them."

"What about you? Your power?" Norman asked.

"No, that wouldn't help," Ulrich said. "The Great Creator doesn't allow the use of power in anger or for destruction."

"He should rethink that," Norman quipped. No one seemed to notice.

Wizard Boe cleared his throat. "Can we out run them?"

"No. We don't have the speed, supplies, or fuel. We might be able to keep running around for a couple of days on the fuel that we have, and then drift for even longer, but eventually they'd be able to grab us and board." Norman twisted his hands together. He looked like a caged tiger longing for an escape, as were they all.

The five of them stood looking at each other in silence for what seemed an eternity. They all knew that they were on the precipice of disaster for the plan they had fostered for such a long time. Everything they'd sacrificed for was on the brink of destruction. Desperately, they each hoped that an idea to save them would miraculously occur.



"Their locking clamps are engaged and an airlock has been established," Norman said.

Gayle took a deep breath and nodded. Either they were about to get out of the bind in which the ship had been ensnared, or they'd all be caught and killed.

"Open the hatch," she said.

Cooper and Norman were with her, hopefully to ensure that Oliver and his henchmen didn't attack her immediately. Gayle had agreed to let Oliver and ten military types on board to gather the hostages and return them to the government vessel. If five hundred armed men barged through the door, there was little they could do, but it was the only chance they had.

Gerard Oliver stepped over the threshold first. He looked like an ambassador in his electric blue suit and thin tie, a communicator draped over his right ear. The full-sun lights reflected off his pale skin almost as much as the shiny fabric. His companions, ten in total, all wore green and grey fatigues and surprisingly appeared to be unarmed. Gayle had no illusions that any of them couldn't reach into their pants somewhere and pull out a pulse pistol. The important thing was that they looked like they were living up to their deal, so there was at least a chance this could work.

"You've made the right decision, Darwin," Oliver said, stopping in her circle.

"I'm not so sure about that. If I've got this figured right, I'm pretty screwed no matter how this turns out," Gayle said.

Oliver flashed a hungry wolf grin. "I've never accused you of being naïve. There will be a price to pay, but we don't have to worry about that today."

Gayle was fine with that plan. “How is this going to go down?”

“I’m going to go back to my ship and prepare for the trip back to Earth. You are going to escort these fine gentlemen—this is Captain Diaz—to the hostages. They’ll bring them back, and we’ll be on our way.” Oliver put his hand on one of the soldier’s shoulders. His eyes held their normal deception, but Gayle also sensed a dangerous menace there.

“Okay. Let’s do it,” Gayle said.

Oliver went back through the hatch and onto his ship. Gayle supposed that he didn’t want to be involved if there was any ugliness that ensued. The military was also most likely the thrust behind the mission, with the slimy political advisor there merely to provide intelligence. They didn’t need him when it came to their calling.

Gayle sent Cooper down a corridor on his next errand and took Norman with her and Captain Diaz. The next stage in their plan required dealing with ten highly armed, and likely intelligent, mercenaries. She hoped they could do so without anyone dying, but she couldn’t know that yet.

They arrived at Cargo Bay 2, having walked in silence from the boarding hatch. The soldiers clanked and jingled behind her as they came to a stop in unison. Gayle hit the button and led the men into the chamber.

Norman walked farther into the room. “If you come this way, we’re almost there,” he said, pointing toward the rows of supplies stacked in tall spires in the back of the bay. Since they weren’t carrying any cargo currently, they were only supplies that Gayle kept on hand for the ship.

The military captain, whose appearance was barely discernable from the others, though his age showed in deeper lines in his face, followed Norman and stopped beside him. “Where are they?”

Norman continued on to the back of the chamber as if looking for something lost. He walked back to the group with a puzzled expression when all of the militia was gathered in the center. Gayle stayed just inside the door.

“I asked our security chief to bring our guests down here,” he said. He began walking back toward the door. “I’d better call and see what the hold up is.”

“Wait!” Captain Diaz yelled, his gun thrusting into his hands as if they were opposing magnets.

Norman turned about, but kept moving toward the exit. “I just need to use the comm System to talk to the chief.”

“Stop right now,” Diaz said, beginning a sprint toward Norman.

Fifteen feet from the door, he turned around and ran. “Out!” he screamed at Gayle.

A red pulse of energy hit the door frame as Norman dove through and the door slammed across at Norman’s command. Before the door sealed into the joint, they could see Diaz’s red, angry face coming toward them.

“They’re going to call their ship,” Gayle said, panting despite the fact that she’d only run ten feet.

“Nah. We already had the scrambler on this bay. No signals can get in or out. We need to get Cooper and Ricardo working ASAP, though.”



Norman and Gayle could hear the chanting before they reached the conference room. It was packed with at least twenty Gate Keepers, plus Ricardo and Cooper. Gayle’s crewmen were sitting in the center of the room on the conference table. Ulrich and Wizard Boe were nearest them, their hands on the large, mysterious book that held magic spells like the one they were trying to cast.

The words being sung by the Gate Keepers sounded the same as when Boe had done the transport trick with Alexa. Phrases were already meshing together into a string of indistinguishable syllables. Gayle wanted some rational explanation of why their supposed magic worked, but knew she was unlikely to receive any answers. Since her whole life was invested in the endeavor, she tried to concentrate on the results rather than the methods.

“We’re ready,” Norman said, coming to a stop just inside the doors. The Gate Keepers were stacked two deep around the table, filling the room over capacity.

Ulrich minutely nodded to Gayle and Norman, but their presence otherwise went unnoticed. The chanting continued for several more minutes. Gayle felt the familiar electric tingle fill the air. A silent, sound sucking concussion then hit the room, accompanied by a flash of light, brilliant, but brief. In the moment it took for Gayle's eyes to adjust, she could see that Cooper and Ricardo were gone.



Cooper pulled his pistol from his waistband, held it up in a firing stance, and searched the room for targets. They were in a closed in compartment very much like the engine room of the *Gossamer*. The room wasn't as big as the one in which Ricardo normally performed his job. To their advantage at this point, that meant there was no one to interrupt their work.

"Get to it," Cooper whispered to the older man.

Ricardo took a step and watched his feet, no doubt wondering if they were really on the military ship, or if the Gate Keepers magic was some kind of illusion.

Cooper knew how he felt. It was hard to grasp that they had been transported hundreds of feet through vacuum space and metal, and lived to tell. He didn't feel as though his cells had been scrambled, but his mind told him that they somehow had been. He'd have to worry about that later.

The reactor was based on anti-matter, so Ricardo had a lot of experience in how it worked. He'd built and maintained similarly powered space vehicles for years for the government space administration, and for the last year for Gayle. He probably didn't know all the details he'd need to fix it if it were broken, but he knew enough to be able to break it.

Ricardo walked through the door to the reactor, clearly surprised that it was unlocked. The military no doubt had not anticipated enemies transporting directly into the vital parts of the ship. They thought their forces and exterior guns would prevent any intruders from gaining access. They'd have to rethink that security measure now.

As Ricardo began examining the access ports to the reactor, Cooper heard the sound of boot steps coming near. He debated with himself as to whether he would shoot first and worry about going to hell later, or if

he'd give the soldier a chance to be quietly, and safely, taken down. Cooper looked in to the chamber at Ricardo, who was still trying to figure out how to disable the reactor, and made his decision.

Cooper crouched down and waited. The soldier appeared momentarily, dressed in black fatigues with a pistol at his side. His eyes were focused on the ground, and he obviously had no indication that intruders were in his midst. He finally looked up when he was within ten feet of Cooper's position. The moment they made eye contact, Cooper pulled the trigger on his gun and dropped the young man. There was no sound other than the low whine of the pulse blast and the thump of the body crumbling to the floor.

Ricardo turned around to identify the commotion. Cooper gave him a motion to hurry, and the older man went back to work. Eventually, the engineer decided on what needed to be done, and began pulling out parts of the machine. Alarms immediately went insane as the reactor detected that it could not safely function. The machine hummed to a stop.

Now the dangerous part of their mission began. "C'mon," Cooper yelled to Ricardo. He'd identified an adequate hiding space in the compartment that would at least give them time to decide their best move. They transferred to the far side of the reactor and squatted together in a concealed corner.

Three soldiers shuffled into the reactor chamber first. They found their blasted comrade, unconscious and most likely dead on the floor, and almost simultaneously drew their weapons. Their eyes, now steely and alert, scanned the area for the perpetrator. Cooper could see them through a corner of the glass case and only hoped that he was mostly obscured. To be sure, he ducked into the corner as far as possible.

One of the soldiers began walking to the far edge of the reactor chamber, where Ricardo and Cooper were hiding. Cooper firmed his grip on the pistol and readied to make a blazing escape attempt. Unfortunately, he knew they had little hope of making it out alive. The Gate Keepers had been unable to provide them with teleportation back to the *Gossamer*. He had a plan, but it would be ruined if they were discovered too early.

A second rush of people came into the room, distracting the soldier from the area. There were three more soldiers, two middle aged men in

mechanics garb, two officers, and Gerard Oliver. His weasel face was pinched in anger and his eyes searched for someone to blame.

"What's the problem here?" he bellowed to the soldiers.

They looked at him like deer in headlights. "We don't know, but there's a man down." They pointed to the fallen soldier.

Oliver barely registered the injured man. "Is there an intruder on board, or did this idiot try to blow up the ship and then off himself?"

The soldiers looked at each other, dumbstruck. One of the officers, identified by their sleek black uniforms and silver piping on their chests, spoke up. "It looks as if specific parts of the reactor have been disabled. I doubt this man would know how to do that. Plus, the wound is in his chest. He would have went for the head if he was trying suicide."

"Okay, so let's get moving to find an intruder," Oliver said. He walked over to the glass encasing the reactor and stared at the disarrayed control panel with disgust.

The accompanying soldiers were all at least fifteen feet away from Oliver, spreading out to search the room and the rest of the corridor. Cooper knew this was his best chance. Tapping Ricardo on the leg, the security chief flew out of his crouched position and ran to seize the government attaché as fast as he could.

Oliver saw him coming at the last moment and tried to move out of the way. He only managed a weak scream and to stick himself against the glass before him. Cooper wrapped his arms around Oliver's middle and brought the pulse pistol to the man's head.

"You're getting me off this ship, and you're doing it now," Cooper said harshly into his captive's ear. Ricardo stood up from their hiding place and moved in behind the two men.

The soldiers responded to the commotion, but stopped short at seeing that Oliver was under control and in danger. Cooper began walking them toward the exit.

"I'm heading to the door, and my good friend here is going to lead me back to the *Gossamer*. Anyone even looks at me cross, his brains will be fried, and at least some of yours will follow," Cooper said.

Parting like a sea, the eight soldiers moved out of the way, guns in hand. Cooper motioned for them to stay together in one pack, and they shuffled back together like scared sheep.

“Let’s give him what he wants. We’ll deal with them after,” Oliver said, his voice shaky. Sweat was running down the political parasite’s forehead.

Cooper shifted his body to keep Oliver between him and the soldiers, and Ricardo followed suit by walking behind. The military men took no further action before the escaping men backed out into the corridor and the doors to the reactor chamber shut in front of them.

“To the ship!” Cooper said, pushing Oliver in the back.

Oliver stumbled, catching his balance enough to stay upright only at the last moment. “This way.”

“Run,” Cooper commanded him, and they began sprinting through the government vessel.

It only took a short minute to reach the docking hatch, and they made it without seeing any more armed men. Cooper guessed that the ship was smaller, and had less people capacity than he thought, or they were just very lucky. He didn’t care which. One soldier guarded the entryway to the *Gossamer*. He sat in a plastic chair by the door, tipping back so that only two legs touched the ground. As they approached, Cooper pulled Oliver closer, though there wasn’t much need.

“This isn’t over,” Oliver snarled.

The soldier tried to pull his pulse rifle from his back, but stopped moving when Cooper pointed a pistol in his direction. Cooper shoved Oliver toward the man as he moved on toward the entry to his ship.

“Today it is.”

Cooper and Ricardo disappeared through the hatch, and into safety.