

Somewhere Down Below

For a supersonic jet trip, the ride from Equador to Texas seemed slow and bumpy. Gayle knew that she needed to try to get some sleep before they reached their destination and the real adventure began. But with her body feeling every shift of the plane, that didn't seem likely to happen. Ever since they got Cooper and Ricardo back from the military vessel and they sped away from the disabled ship, she'd been jacked up on adrenaline. She'd lain down for a few hours, but the couple minutes of sleep she'd managed to force on herself had been listless. The anticipation of completing this mission, of obtaining the final artifact, was killing her.

Cooper, who apparently could sleep through anything, looked rested sitting beside her. He'd slept for quite a while as she tossed and turned next to him. Gayle had pushed away thoughts of slapping him awake, and instead tried to be grateful that at least one of them would be fresh.

The President of the United States was sitting in the seat directly in front of them. He hadn't spoken in hours. Gayle still had some trouble believing that she had assisted the Gate Keepers in kidnapping the man, and now in forcing him to take them to the artifact. On some level, none of it seemed real.

Ulrich and Wizard Boe sat in the seats adjacent to Gayle and Cooper. They appeared to be meditating, both with their eyes closed. Ulrich had his hands folded, resting in the lap of his black trousers. The Wizard has his elbows perched on the armrests to either side, his hands locked together in front of his face. Every few seconds, his lips twitched as if he were silently reciting a prayer.

Twenty Gate Keeper soldiers were behind them, filling every available space in the small, luxury jet they'd commandeered at the Equador airport. The fighters were all pasty, young, and dressed in black.

Gayle leaned closer to Cooper. "How many more men are meeting us on the ground?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Don't know. Wouldn't say." He pointed to the wizards. "Hopefully enough to fight an army."

"I don't like the sound of that," she said.

"Me neither. This won't be bloodless."

She nodded, "Do you think they'll be waiting for us?"

"Don't think so. The military has a lot of other problems on Earth right now. Probably don't have any idea we took this plane."

'At some point, they'll be ready, though," she said. Cooper only nodded.

Figuring out a way to escape Oliver and his military escort without bloodshed had been difficult enough. This time, though, they were going into confrontation prepared to use force. Young men sucked into the military machine, who probably joined for the square meals and the chance at an education, would be in the line of fire. Some of them would die, as would some of the Gate Keepers. Gayle also knew that she and Cooper were not immune to laser blasts.

The thought of it made her weary. Gayle leaned closer to Cooper, placing her head on his shoulder. Hoping that she could make the last hour of the flight without thinking, she closed her eyes.



Gayle wasn't sure they should leave the plane. The Gate Keepers on the ground told them that the area was secure, but she didn't know if she trusted them. They had set the jet down in the middle of a military zone, and according to the President, in front of one of their most important facilities. Gayle had trouble believing that there were no soldiers guarding the perimeter.

She looked out the window again and saw nothing concerning. Twenty more black clad soldiers were stationed around a small depression in the side of a hill. The lack of warning signs were more troubling to Gayle than anything.

She walked down the ramp when Cooper called her. As she and her group progressed toward the awaiting soldiers near what she supposed was the entrance to the base, no gunfire rang out, and no large trucks with missiles came their way. Gayle blended into the pack near the front, following Ulrich and Boe as they approached the leader of their protégés.

The lead soldier in black reported that they'd not run into any resistance. They pulled President Porter to the front and forced him to enter a code in

a keypad near the door, and place his hand into a DNA scanner. This would announce their arrival, but it was also the only way, or at least the fastest way, to gain entrance.

After several clicks, the heavy metal door cranked open. A gaping, black maw lurked behind it, a tunnel that went dark within feet of the opening. Without fanfare, half of the Gate Keeper soldiers entered the void. Gayle stuck with her core group and went in next, with Cooper at her side. The remaining muscle men pulled up the rear.

Gayle expected chaos to break out at any time. Once her eyes adjusted to the tunnel, she realized that dim lights tracked overhead, giving the passageway an eerie glow. It only needed some slime and hopping toads to really provide the feeling of some fantasy movie about trolls and vampires. The only sounds were the footfalls of the people marching to their potential deaths, and the echoes of those steps off of the steel walls containing them.

Not able to see past the tall Wizards in front of her, Gayle wondered if any change in scenery was upcoming. Her apprehension increased exponentially with each step they took deeper into the dim space. A wave of relief washed over her when the people in front of her stopped abruptly.

Ulrich turned back to her. "There's a junction up ahead. A party is going ahead to check it out."

"Do you have any idea what the layout of this place is?" Cooper asked.

Ulrich shrugged. "No. We never had this kind of action planned."

Gayle looked back to President Porter. "What about you?"

He shook his head. "I've known about this facility, but I've never been here before. That helps keep a secret base secret."

Gayle began to ask him another question, but the searing boom of laser fire stopped the words in her throat. Flashes of unnatural light filtered back to her position, as well as the screams and grunts of injured men. The Gate Keeper soldiers behind her group rushed around them, pulling their guns as they prepared to join the fray.

When the soldiers were past, the scene ahead became more visible, though she could still not tell what was happening. Cooper forced her

against the wall and down to the ground. She could see Gate Keepers trying to get around their brethren to get shots off. They were bottlenecked at a T intersection in the tunnel, and the military appeared to be firing from both sides.

Ulrich and Wizard Boe were perched behind the group of fighting men, squatting together near the wall. Though her vision wasn't clear, they appeared to be holding hands and chanting. Gayle couldn't tell what they were doing to help, but she hoped they could keep enough of their soldiers alive to protect the rest and accomplish their mission. The thought of failure after so much struggle was almost as disappointing as her possible death.

At their leader's command, the Gate Keepers began pulling back into the tunnel toward Gayle and Cooper. Their numbers were cut by at least a third. The bodies of the fallen were obscured for the most part, but Gayle could see that men were being left behind in the retreat. She could also see a shield of some kind, a transparent wall of pink light, providing the men with protection.

Five government soldiers followed out of the tunnels up ahead, their rifles blazing. The shield deflected all but one of their shots, which penetrated and hit a Gate Keeper in the leg. Fire from the Gate Keepers quickly cut down the government soldiers, whose bodies heaped on top of the others around them. The Gate Keepers stopped their position and waited for another wave of attack.

No more soldiers came. Ulrich and Wizard Boe eventually disengaged from their chanting and sat back against the wall, out of breath.

Gayle walked to them and squatted down. "Is that it?" she asked.

Boe took more deep breaths before he answered. "For now, at least. There may be more men waiting deeper in the compound."

"Can we defeat them?"

The tall wizard shrugged. "No way to know. I hope so."

Gayle was not filled with confidence. She looked to Cooper and hoped to find reassurance in his eyes. She saw her own uncertainties mirrored back in his caramel orbs.

No more men or blast fire came from the intersection. The Gate Keepers remained hunkered down in the corridor, ready for action. After a long minute, Wizard Boe ordered them to move forward. When they reached the downed military men, Boe found one that was not dead and pulled him away from his fallen colleagues. The Wizard placed his hands on the man's charred chest and began a quiet chant. After several moments, the soldier opened his eyes and moaned. In only a minute more, the man who had been nearly dead was wide awake.

Boe motioned to the President, and Porter reluctantly emerged from the pack. Without a word, the Wizard pulled the alert soldier to his feet and motioned toward him.

The President seemed to know what he had to do. "Take us to the teleportation device," he said.

The man's eyes dimmed momentarily, then he nodded and began walking. They turned right when they reached the end, into another dimly lit tunnel. They snaked through at a fast pace, Gayle finding herself breathing heavily as they progressed. Part of her stress was the physical exertion, and part was her imagination envisioning soldiers popping up all around them.

They encountered no one.



As the President drifted back in the pack toward her, Gayle wondered if he regretted what he was doing. He carried his dark head high and his shoulders straight. There was no hint of defeat in him now.

It felt like they'd been walking forever. She supposed that the deeper underground the base sat, the more secure it was against attack. Today, the men and women who would normally be defending it must have been AWOL or off fighting other battles.

Gayle increased her speed to catch up to President Porter and then matched his stride. She didn't know why she wanted to talk to him. "I think you're doing the right thing," she said.

"It doesn't feel right. I'm betraying the country I vowed to protect," he said, not looking at her.

"I wouldn't look at it that way. I'm doing what I'm doing because I think it is going to protect the country."

He shook his head. "Then you've been brainwashed by these zealots."

"Have you seen what they can do?" she asked him.

Porter glanced to her. "I've heard stories."

"They're more than stories. I can't explain it, but they have magic. I believe them when they say that they only want the artifacts to rescue their people."

Laughing, Porter turned to her. "Is that what they've been telling you?"

She nodded. "I believe them."

"You shouldn't. People don't take supreme power and then just give it back. When it takes so much to get the power, you keep it. Trust me."

Gayle took a deep breath, knowing he might be right. She'd seen the evils of power during her days in Washington and knew how easily it corrupted even those with pure intentions. "What do you think they're going to do?" she asked.

"Take over the world," he said, his eyes straight forward again and cold.

Letting her steps fall short, Gayle fell back in line with Cooper. She was tired of talking.



When they came to a locked door, the Gate Keeper soldiers signaled for everyone to back away and cover themselves. Waves of understanding washed over Gayle and she knew instinctively that the end was near. Behind the door was the artifact they sought, and the enemy who intended to kill to keep them from getting it. Once again, people were about to die.

She crouched down beside Cooper and leaned into his side, her head on his shoulder. "I love you," she whispered, just in case.

He pulled a big arm around her shoulders and pulled her body into his, kissing her head. "Me to," he said softly.

She chuckled and closed her eyes.

"We'll be okay," he said.

Gayle nodded and prayed, to who she didn't know, that he was right. Still conflicted, she wanted the Gate Keepers to prevail so that she and Cooper could live. At the same time, she feared them getting the artifact and constructing their portal. It was beginning to feel like a no win situation.

The Gate Keeper soldiers blasted the door several times with their laser rifle, making only minimal impact on the door. It appeared to be solid steel and slid into place from inside the wall. They wouldn't be able to kick it in and the guns didn't appear to be adequate to burn through it. The military had actually put some thought in housing the artifact in a safe place.

Wizard Boe and Ulrich walked closer to the door, spoke a few words to a soldier beside them, then began their now familiar chant. Gayle supposed that if an old trick worked, there was no reason to quit using it. The soldier they were targeting stood at the ready, his weapon cocked for action, as if he were now looking his enemy in the eye. When he was transported into the far chamber, the man was as good as dead. He looked like he was barely twenty-three, his pale skin smooth and pure. He'd never experience the wrinkles of age or the other marks time often left on skin. Yet, he didn't seem to comprehend, or mind the sacrifice he was most likely making.

As she looked at him, the soldier disappeared. There no fading or graduation. He was just gone. A moment later, from within the mountain around them, a muffled mechanical grind began. The Gate Keeper soldiers rushed toward the door, ready for the fight to begin. When daylight could be seen through the door, the shooting began.

The first few Gate Keepers fell in the doorway. The rest rushed over them into the chamber beyond. Gayle wondered how many government men were in there protecting the artifact. The fewer that had to die, the better.

Laser blasts rang out in rapid succession like a machine gun for several minutes. Pain filled grunts and groans accompanied the metallic wind

made by the weapons. Wizard Boe and Ulrich slipped into the fray, leaving her, Cooper, and the President in the open hallway. She felt like a coward, yet she had little desire to join the fight until it was over. Without a weapon or other fighting skills, she knew she had nothing to contribute.

The sounds of conflict from the room quieted after only a few moments. Cooper turned to her, his light eyes full of knowledge and regret. "Got to go in there."

"No you don't," Gayle said immediately.

Cooper leaned forward, kissed her quickly on the lips, and then jetted off down the hall. Gayle closed her eyes, cursed internally, then followed him. For someone who never really wanted to be a part of the action, she certainly wound up in the fray more than she liked.

Bodies filled her vision. Gayle assumed not all of the men, Gate Keepers and military men, were dead, but she could see anguished, fixed stares on the faces of some of them. She gratefully took her eyes away from those men to the ones at the back of the small chamber who were fighting hand to hand. Computers lined the back wall and two metal desks flanked the other walls. A bank of cabinets covered the wall beside the only entry door.

Gayle stopped in the doorway, her feet underneath an unmoving body. Cooper charged forward to join the fight, which involved five men in black and silver government fatigues, one Gate Keeper soldier, Ulrich, and Wizard Boe. The two wizards were forced to fight hand to hand, rather, than cast spells, and they were not doing well. A right hook from one of the government soldiers landed on Boe's jaw, sending him down in a heap on top of another fallen man.

Standing transfixed, Gayle watched in shock. Ulrich struggled with his opponent, holding his arms and attempting to pin him to the wall. The government soldier was larger than the wizard, and certainly more beefy. Undeterred, Ulrich pulled away with lightening speed, throwing an elbow into the man's face. His opponent slammed back against the wall, then slid down it, unconscious. Ulrich seemed to pause as well, catching his breath.

Gayle stumbled forward, stepping on a downed man, who moaned under her weight. President Porter bumped by her as he moved through the door. He went to the cabinets, pulling the nearest open. Porter began sorting through the contents.

“What are you doing?” Gayle called to him.

The President continued to plow through the shelves and moved to the next cabinet. “What do you think? The artifact.”

“You should come back over here.”

“They’re not getting it,” Porter said.

Gayle didn’t like the desperate look on the man’s weary face. She didn’t know what she planned to do, but she took a step toward him. He pulled away from the cabinet with a stone circle in his hand. Gayle knew immediately that it was the famous artifact, and what he wanted to do with it. Porter slammed the priceless object down on top of the metal cabinet and bent to pick up a pistol from the floor.

Gayle lunged forward, trying not to think about the men her feet kicked on the way. She stopped in front of the President as he stood up, pulse pistol in hand.

“Get back,” he snarled.

“Don’t do this.”

Porter shook his head, fury in his eyes. “You may be willing to betray your government, but I’m not.” He reached back behind him without looking and picked up the artifact.

“I know you’re afraid to lose power. Make a deal with the Gate Keepers. You can keep it.” Gayle didn’t know what to do than try to negotiate with him.

Taking a step away from Gayle, Porter kept his pistol on her, but turned his eyes to the other object he held. An animal wildness dominated his expression. “Not if they get this.”

“They’ll kill you if you destroy that,” Gayle said. She didn’t know if it was true, but she could think of nothing more to say.

The President didn’t respond. He put the barrel of the gun to a section of the artifact. Panicked, Gayle reached for his nearest arm. She grabbed it, distracting Porter from pulling the trigger. He struggled to pull his gun

hand from her. Gayle put her second hand on the pistol and tried to pull it from his grasp.

A black clad body flew into Gayle's field of vision, storming past her before she could understand what was happening. She fell backward, tripping over a body, landing on another. Her wind knocked out, Gayle was on her back watching a fight unfold in front of her.

It was Ulrich. He had one hand on the artifact and one on Porter's gun. Both men were mashed together against the file cabinets. Gayle glanced over her shoulder to see if she could summon more help. Unfortunately, the four remaining government soldiers were still conscious and battling. Cooper had a man down on the ground, attempting to pummel his face.

Gayle shrunk away from Porter and Ulrich when the whiz of laser blasts sounded. The first shot sailed above Ulrich's head and absorbed in the far wall. A second burned into Ulrich's shoulder, calling forth a howl of pain. Ulrich writhed forward, causing him and the President to stumble to the side, toward Gayle.

Ulrich still fought against Porter, but Gayle could see the depth of his wound and knew he wouldn't be able to put forward a strong resistance. She looked around and saw a pulse rifle in the hand of a dead man. Picking it up, she leveled it at the jumbled men. She wasn't sure at which one to aim.

Another shot from Porter's pistol sent a beam of deadly light into Ulrich's chest and the decision was made for her. As Ulrich fell away, dead or dying, the artifact still grasped in his hand, Gayle aimed at the President. Not giving herself time to think about what she was doing, Gayle pointed the rifle at the man and pulled the trigger. A blast tore from the gun and in less than a blink embedded into Porter's chest. He fell back against the cabinets and dropped to the floor.

Gayle sat staring at the President, for how long she didn't know. Cooper touched her on the shoulder to bring her back to reality some time later. She looked up to him, unknown tears streaming down her face. She could say nothing.

"Everything's okay," he said.

Watching as Wizard Boe picked up the artifact and felt Ulrich's neck for a pulse, she wished she felt that way.