

~ North Star ~

by Windstar

Disclaimers:

Rating: If we were in the US, this would get an R rating, or maybe a 16+ rating in Canada. One or two buckets of guts and gore will probably be around sometime during the story, as well as romantic interest between two females. If this bothers you, then go find another story to read.

I hope you all enjoy, please let me know what you think as this was my first posted story. I can be reached at adarkbow@yahoo.com

Prologue

The planet was dying.

With it went the Tiri Empire.

It was four marks past the zenith of the sun in the capital city of Tir-Larin when the Bak'ra broke through the last of the orbital defenses. The last of the massive orbital installations tumbled from orbit, vomiting fire and debris behind it. The huge station slowly, majestically, disintegrated as it crashed into the upper atmosphere. Its final destruction was a mere formality, for only a few dozen of its nearly four thousand strong crew were still alive by then. The few still alive on the ground watched in fascinated terror as the dying orbital fort left a trail of flame behind it as it swept across the sky.

A small handful of planet based fighters rose from the surface and engaged the massive orbiting ships. They had less than no chance of causing much damage, and their crews knew it was a suicide mission. Most of them were infected with the same plague which had killed most of the planet's population, and the hope of a quick, honorable death was all they had left to cling to.

Nearly half a solar system away, a pitifully small number of ships from the once proud Tiri fleet held station, hiding behind one of the gas giants. Five ships, the rear guard for the evacuation, all that could be spared, kept watch through remote sensors as landing barges with fighter escorts began the slow descent down to the Tiri home world. There was simply no one left to stop them, and what few soldiers were still alive on the surface could only put up a token resistance to the military juggernaut that was about to roll over them.

Lady Emily Burtin Windstar, Guardian, Lady of Whitestead, second in line for the imperial throne, Sword Commander, stood on the command deck of the Imperial Space Force Ship, *North Star*. Her black uniform, edged with silver, and bearing the two red stripes above her left breast of a full Guardian, was immaculate as always. She ignored the wetness on her cheeks as she watched the relayed sensor feed, hate burning in the pale, blue eyes that watched the destruction

of her home world. The command crew was equally as silent, and more than one of them were sobbing at their stations.

At a touch over six feet, Lady Windstar was rather tall for a Tiri, and her nearly raven black hair was unusual enough in a population predominated by lighter hair. It was, however, impossible to mistake her as anything other than the person in charge. A nearly visible aura of command hung around her. Even with her fists clenched in rage and tension radiating from her, she had the posture of one used to obeying orders, and having her orders obeyed. Her crew took comfort from her presence, their world had been taken, but the fight was not yet over.

Provost Angwar bent slightly over the console he was manning, and quickly jotted down an incoming message. With the silent efficiency of one long familiar with his job, he transferred the message to one of the secure message pads and brought the electronic reading with him as he approached Lady Windstar. The sensor feed went dark in front of them as one of the passing Bak'ra fighters spotted the remote sensor platform and blew it from existence. The view screen went white for a moment, and then a view of the swirling multicolored clouds of the gas giant in front of them filled the screen.

Just as silently, she took the pad from him and pressed her thumb to the recognition slot, waiting the moment for it to accept her DNA and decode the message. She, of course, could have done so without Angwar's help, but a crew served aboard a Guardian ship for a reason. She had sensed it the moment the hyper message had arrived, as had the other five ships, and she knew she was not going to like the orders she was about to read. Not shifting from her spot in front of the screen, she lowered her eyes and scanned the terse message.

"Thank you, Angwar, we'll be departing shortly. Secure all sections for Transition." Angwar was a good man, he had served on board since her Time of Joining, as had most of her Command Crew, and he knew better than to ask questions when her voice held that particular dark tone to it.

"Yes, Ma'am." Was his solemn response as he saluted, a clenched fist to the chest, and wearily returned to his station. Months of being on constant alert had drained all of them, and they all would have killed for a good night's sleep. He spared one worried glance towards the Guardian's back and wondered how much longer it would be before people started to crack. Her voice didn't show the strain she was under though, as she turned towards a woman clad in a near blood-colored uniform, bearing five small clusters of silver stars on the front of her uniform; one star for every five enemy fighters destroyed in combat.

"Shieri, get everyone aboard, we don't want to leave anyone behind." The small woman nodded and turned towards her own console, quietly making sure that all the fighters flying cover and scouting missions for the rear guard formation were brought back into the Guardian's hangars.

Lady Windstar, or Emily to her friends, clenched her hand about the pad, her knuckles turning white as she held, barely, onto control. Guardians were sworn to protect, and it was against everything in them to leave with the evacuation. Indeed, some had disregarded direct orders, even from the Emperor himself, and thrown themselves at the enemy. *Of course, by that time,*

there were too few of us left to do much of anything, she thought bitterly. The plague had killed nearly ninety five percent of all Tiri unfortunate enough to come in contact with it, which included everyone who had been on the surface of Tiri Prime when the Bak'ra dusted it those hellish months ago. It was a miracle that the Emperor, her father, and the Crown Prince, her elder brother, had not been on planet when it happened. Her thoughts shied away from the hulks of dead Guardians, which, until recently, had floated around the planet; the remains of those who had not been so fortunate, for when a Guardian's human body died, the ship they were joined to became useless.

All in all, of the seven hundred-strong Guardian forces, which had existed only a year before, only twenty-three were still alive. With a thought, she opened tight beam communications with the other four Guardians under her command and shared the orders with them. She could taste the sadness and hatred in their signals, and she agreed. She understood why some of the others had ignored orders and attacked, almost envied them, as did all the others. A day of reckoning would come though, and she felt the others' agreement at that.

"Ma'am, all fighters are aboard, and all sections secured for departure." Emily nodded distractedly in answer, having already felt the last of the single and twin person fighters come aboard a moment ago. Protocol demanded that her Provost make the report though, and she offered him a grim smile. It was a sad statement on just how thinly they were stretched that her Provost was manning the communications station.

"Thank you, Angwar, time for us to get out of here." Even now the Bak'ra would be sending scouts to secure the rest of the system. She offered up one last prayer for the poor souls who were still on the surface of Tiri Prime. Her voice lowered, as her eyes became ice, hatred burning in them. "But we will make sure that the Bak'ra pay for this."

As one, the five Guardian ships turned and began their run out of the system. They had to reach the Okiriwaztch limit to engage their warp-gate drives, and the second their normal drives flared to life, the Bak'ra were going to spot them. Emily half hoped that they would run into some Bak'ra ships between here and the OK limit, as it was known. She had the nearly overpowering need to blow something into very small bits and pieces at the moment. Fortunately, or unfortunately, they made it to the OK limit less than an hour later without any of the pursuing Bak'ra ships getting anywhere close to them.

Each of the massive ships came to a relative stop as they began the formation of the warp-gate that would take them nearly forty light years away, in the first of many frog leaps towards the meeting spot with the rest of the evacuation fleet. Emily closed her eyes, seeking with her sensors, probing the space around where the thousands of tons of metal which was her other body lay in space. On her long-range sensors she could "see" the bright dots of energy of the closing fast attack ships of the Bak'ra fleet. Sent after them when they had picked up her own forces normal space drives no doubt. She spared them a second of hatred, the feeling coiling around in her chest like something alive. Then she turned her focus on what she was searching for. The specific gravitational eddies around the point where she was in space.

Warp gating was not a pleasant thing for a normal Tiri, and she made certain to warn the crew before she did it. "Gate in ten seconds." Her normal voice had deepened as she focused on the coming translation, her hands unconsciously spreading from her sides as she felt her Warp-Gate engines power up. With a savage grin, she clenched her fists, for a moment forgetting months of pain, hatred and loss in the moment that she guided her ship self and all aboard, through the warp-gate which she opened before them.

She had heard it often enough described as forming a small wormhole, bending space to where two distant points touched. To a Guardian though, those few moments of formation, when there was nothing but the pure flow of energy and the swirling patterns of gravity far too complex for even the most sophisticated of AI's to follow as she formed the gate, it was heaven. No AI ever built had managed to do what she and her fellow Guardians did. For the formation of a warp-gate was not only a science, but also an art form. The gate had to be in perfect synch with the gravity eddies at that exact moment around it. A wrong move and the ship in question simply ceased to exist as the gate collapsed upon it when it entered. Without the ability to Warp-gate, it was quite possible that the Tiri would never have managed to leave their own solar system, for no means had ever been found to truly move faster than the speed of light. Instead, they just went around it, by entering another bringing two points, light years apart, together and passing from one place to another. There was a moment, when a ship passed through the swirling, crackling energy, of the gate, when it simply ceased to exist in both places.

The moment stretched onwards to infinity, and ended just as suddenly as it had begun, leaving Emily strangely empty, as it always did. This time though, the emptiness was worse, for this time they had just abandoned their home world. Her four fellow Guardians each slid through the gates they had formed near her, residual energy bleeding off them in a brilliant show of light, even as it was off her own hull.

"Angwar, lets get to the rendezvous location." She needed rest, that's what she needed. Feeling the beginnings of a headache, she massaged her temple with a slender hand. They would be warp-gating for nearly four days to reach the rendezvous with the rest of what was left of the Tiri fleet. Maybe she would be able to get in a few hours sleep without nightmares in that time.

"Ma'am, where are we headed?"

She grinned at the rather timid question coming from the engineering station, and the young man who manned it. Timons always reminded her of a Lorisk, a ground-burrowing animal from Tiri who dug out intricate burrows. The young engineer was very good at his job, else he would not have been posted to the command crew, but he had problems interacting with others, and was rather on the shy side. She mentally shook herself, realizing that most of the Command Crew were still looking at her and waiting for an answer. She had to be more tired than she thought, to space out like that, and she caught Angwar's worried glance. Doing her best to shove away the weariness that dragged upon her soul she offered them a reassuring smile.

"It's a nice system, with an inhabited third planet. The locals, according to the scouts, call it Earth."

Chapter 1

2010, 66 years Post Evacuation

As most important things in the history of the galaxy, it started with a small thing. A magnetic constrictor clamp that had not been replaced in the small crafts routine maintenance while it was at Luna base, and a small error in its computers. A small mistake really, when you consider that the atmospheric craft was part of a small fleet of such vessels cycling through the massive base. Each specially built only a decade ago, as time was measured in this new world, for little more than stealth and speed. The fifty meter long craft had become the workhorse of the fleet, hauling people and cargo between the bases spread out across most of the solar system.

This one in particular had been built nearly twenty years ago, to avoid the rapidly improving human radar and space observation network. The craft were cycled through so many different pilots that, despite tradition, they had retained their original call numbers. As the years progressed, especially during the last decade or so, it had become harder and harder to continually evade the various military and civilian detection systems that had sprung up. Near orbit wasn't too bad so far, despite what NORAD and its sister organizations could do. Hitting the atmosphere was the tough part, when despite the best stealth systems available the craft still made enough atmospheric turbulence to be seen.

Thus it was that craft RZ-146 had a twenty-minute window in which the Imperial Space Force would manage to obfuscate the small ship's entry and descent through the atmosphere. It was going to be tight, and the craft's pilot, Ilthiron Lithinar, was not a happy man. A twenty-minute window meant a near reckless descent through the atmosphere. It was either that, or wait for six hours in orbit until the next window could be managed. It was his passenger who decided his answer; no one really wanted to spend six hours alone in orbit with a rather annoyed Imperial Marine, certainly not one so senior.

"Sir, we're gonna come down fast and hard. Gonna be a bit a chop I think. We're scheduled to reenter over tha North Pole again." This would be Ilthiron, or Ili's, twenty-second orbital reentry since his recruitment from a slum outside of Mexico City nearly seventeen years ago. Which was the reason Dagger Leader, no, he mentally corrected himself, now Master Sergeant Torrson merely grunted in answer, instead of pointing out how late they were. The boy knew his job, and, if nothing else, Torrson respected people who knew what they were doing. Still, it would not do to keep Lady Windstar waiting, and Torrson was already three hours behind schedule. The investigation of the missing equipment had led him down some interesting paths, and he dared not send anything through the usual channels. The sooner he met with the Lady, the better.

Ili fired the sleek small craft's thrusters well under the detection level of anything that any of the military's had put into orbit so far. It was a pure joy to fly these little things after having spent a month at the helm of one of the intrasystem transports. It wasn't a fighter, but it was close enough for him to enjoy himself. Dipping the wing, he signaled North American ground control that he was beginning his descent.

"Longbow, Longbow, this is RZ-146 beginning our descent. Confirm twenty minute descent window to destination?"

The rather harried looking face of a young woman of obvious Asian descent looked back at him from the com console, planted between him and his passenger, who was riding in the copilot's seat.

"Yes, damnit, I can only give you twenty minutes. Sorry Ili, but we're having a bitch of a time keeping NORAD down these days. Any longer and they'd catch on. Sorry. You're good to proceed on approach lane forty-one, and make sure you try to at least keep your reflection down over the Arctic."

Ili grinned back to her as he pushed the craft into the beginning of its dive, the transparent armored view screen before him traced over by the heads up display. Green rectangles indicated the correct approach lane, while figures ranged down beside it in transparent green, giving him speed, location, and altitude as well as his detection level and any other relevant data from the craft's computer. Ili always did like Yez, and he was going to have to buy her a drink later for putting up with what had obviously been a busy day. Who knew, she might not shoot him down this time. Of course, pigs could be flying over the capital any moment now.

The entry speed was well over mach ten, and Ili kept the speed high all the way down, he only had twenty minutes after all. Once the atmosphere was thick enough, he switched over to air breathing engines, and grinned. The first few kilometers were always the worst. Even the Master Sergeant seemed to be relaxing his ramrod straight posture slightly, knowing that landing wouldn't be that far away and he would only be a few hours late, not half a day late as he had begun to fear.

The craft was five kilometers up with the magnetic constrictor clamp, holding one of the shuttles specially built sensor packages, gave way suddenly. The clamp itself wasn't a problem, the twenty-kilogram sensor package was. It slammed backwards across the delta shaped craft's body, and shattered into a thousand pieces, a good chunk of which entered into one of the craft's two air breathing engines.

Red lights blossomed in the cockpit and Ili's smile vanished as he fought the controls. Still going at well over mach six, the only reason the craft didn't tumble and get ripped to shreds by the sheer speed of the air rushing past it, was Ili's well trained reflexes. The Master Sergeant had been in orbital drops into enemy territories four times before the evacuation. He shut up and hoped to the Maker that Ili knew what he was doing.

Three kilometers up the craft's internal engine, more easily masked from thermal scans was the reasoning for the design Ili had been told, exploded as the damage control sub-computer failed to shut off the fuel feed as it should have. The explosion gutted most of the rear of the craft, and Ili took one look at the readouts in front of him before yelling at the Master Sergeant.

"We're gonna have ta ditch! We're venting plasma from the space drive, it's going to go!" He had to shout to be heard over the small craft's shakes and the emergency alarms blazing. The Master Sergeant grunted and made sure his safety straps were pulled tight. This was going to hurt.

Two and a half kilometers above Northern Quebec, the front of the small craft exploded forward and upward, immediately beginning a semi-controlled tumble as the rest of the blazing transport craft rushed passed it. The escape pod had just enough antigravity drives on her belly to bring the thing to a relatively smooth landing, but it would tumble most of the way down. The Master Sergeant grunted as the world spun around him, the word relatively in landing meant it was going to hurt-- a lot. This was just a perfect end to a perfect day; he could not imagine how things could get any worse.

Then Ili threw up.

Longbow Base, Northern Quebec.

"I don't care what you have to do! Bribe, bully, sabotage, whatever it takes, but that surveyor cannot be allowed to send down a probe to the north pole of Mars."

Lady Windstar was not having a good day. Having spent the last two weeks moving from country to country, and doing her best to nudge the human race away from self-extinction she had hoped to be able to rest a bit when she returned. No such luck had awaited her. It seemed that NASA, now that they finally had that International Space Station up and running properly, was trying to launch another expedition to Mars to replace the failed Polar Lander series from the latter half of the 1990's. Those probes had been destroyed in orbit, since they simply could not be allowed to find out what was going on under the Mars polar icecap. The destruction of not one, but three different probes, had raised far too many questions for the Imperial Fleet's liking, and she had no wish to go through that again.

"Shieri, do what you can, but make damn sure they don't get anywhere near Mars Base." Her voice, even to herself, sounded like a growl, and she tried to temper it with a bit of a grin. Too little sleep and countless demands had, once again, driven her towards the edge. The fact that her ship self was powered down, there was simply no way to mask that large a power signature, was becoming a familiar shadowy ache after the last six decades. It wasn't her Flight Officer's, now turned liaison to NASA, fault that these humans were so blasted stubborn. She would have to fill in her father at the next Council meeting, but it wasn't an immediate threat, so maybe, just maybe, she could go get some rest.

"Now what about this missing equipment?"

Her voice had a bit more of an edge to it as she regarded the Imperial Marine Captain that was uncomfortably sitting across the table from her.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am, I don't know. Master Sergeant Torrson is on his way back right now with his report. He sent me a preliminary report a week ago, and it seems that we are missing an entire intrasystem transport full of equipment that was outwards bound from Mars to the Sensor Sphere. He sent a message a few hours ago stating that he had been delayed, but he should be starting his final approach shortly."

Emily and Angwar shared a glance at that. A transport could hold a lot of equipment, and having an entire shipment somehow go missing was bad news.

"I expect you to make tracking down what happened a high priority, Captain Newlis, understood?"

The unfortunate Captain nodded immediately. Mark Newlis was a good Marine, and she knew he would do everything he could to find out what had happened.

"Yes, Ma'am. I should have a better understanding when I get the Master Sergeant's report."

"Very well, if there is nothing else?"

Emily glanced around the gathered officers and then nodded.

"Dismissed."

Standing, she saluted the thirteen senior officers who had been seated around that table, placing her closed fist over her right chest. None of whom wore the black and silver of a Guardian's uniform, but there were more than enough Gray, for Imperial Air Force, Green, for the Imperial Marine's, and dark blue, for Imperial Navy, uniforms, attached awards and rank patches to create a muted show of colors.

"All of you keep me apprised of your local situations. Mark, make certain that you send a copy to Lirik." Emily held up her hand to forestall the rather young Marine Captain, how odd these new ranks still sounded to her, and shook her head. "He has to know, he's in immediate control of our situation in the asteroid belt, despite what you think about him as a Guardian. If the intrasystem transport disappeared after leaving Mars, it may have passed through his area on the way to the Sensor Sphere." Mark saluted, thumping his chest with his closed fist with a grimace, but he would do as commanded. It didn't stop him from muttering as he left though.

Emily couldn't help but grin at that. Lirik had an innate sense that he was somehow superior to these humans, barbarians he called them, and had no qualms at all about pointing that out to the rapidly expanding number of humans in Imperial Service. The doors slid shut behind the last officer to leave, and she glanced towards the only other person in the room.

"Well, lets hear it, Angwar, or should I say, Imperial Fleet Captain Angwar now?" Her grin was tired, but genuine. The new rank structure might sound odd to her, but Angwar had been nearly apocalyptic when the Imperial decree had been issued, directly from the Emperor, regarding the adoption of the human rank structure. Angwar was the same man who had left Tiri, a touch over

six decades now, even if there was a touch of silver to the hair on his temples now. He answered her with a dark glare.

"I don't much care for these new titles, they sound odd, and they just don't mean anything. Captain? What in the name of the Maker does that mean? Provost, now that's a title that has meaning! Why we had to change over..."

His budding lecture on the sanctity of the title of Provost was cut short as a Kracztir, a Lieutenant, she nearly automatically corrected herself, strode quickly into the room. The worried expression on the young man's face was enough to still Angwar's words. Bad news she guessed, at once straightening herself and nodding to the human to speak.

When he did, she absently corrected her thought from the moment before; it wasn't bad news, it was horrendous news. The Lieutenant's words had been simple and to the point.

"We have another Roswell."

Chapter Two

North American Aerospace Defense Command, also known as NORAD, was buried inside of Cheyenne Mountain, and was the principal headquarters for all the tracking stations in the nations past, and present, ballistic missile warning system. At the moment, its main control room was a scene of organized chaos. The object that had suddenly shown up on nearly every tracking station north of Ohio had come out of nowhere. The new ballistic missile shield, which had been started during the Bush Jr. regime, had been up and mostly working for a while now. It should have spotted what, at first report, appeared to be a missile headed across the North Pole towards the U.S.

That, thank God, had been ruled out before the object had exploded a good mile and a half above ground. Something, which General Charles Starnhorse was devoutly grateful for as he replaced the red phone handle to its matching base. Without even glancing at the officer standing beside him, he kept an eye on the massive tracking display before him.

"Langley agrees, it was under power and changed course towards the end of its fall, or whatever in the hell that was." The General growled and took a sip of the lukewarm coffee. "Seems that whatever it was, we had a Valkyrie-class recon sat in a good spot to get a view of it. Damn thing's blind now, the explosion burned out its optics." The officer beside him winced slightly at that; the Valkyrie was one of the newer recon sats, only two or three years old. They also cost over two billion dollars each, and that was just to build.

"We're getting that visual feed now, General," one of the techs called out, a phone cradled against his shoulder, from a bank of consuls further down into, what the General called, the Pit.

"Let's see it." He crouched over one of the nearby stations and watched the relayed signal, conscious of the officer behind him peering over his shoulder to get a view as well.

The image was remarkably detailed, and the General couldn't hide a smile at the excellent visual quality. The officer behind him seemed to sense the General's thoughts and murmured. "Nice to see we get a bang for our buck at least." The General's answer was preempted by the beginning of whatever it was that had happened. Something seemed to arc across the upper left corner of the field of view, burning as it did. It reached halfway down the screen when it exploded. The screen went white and both officers winced at the brightness of the explosion. Whatever it had been, it had been darn big.

"Nuke?" The General's question was terse, and his eyes worried, as they had every right to be. No sane man wasn't worried about nukes exploding above him. The other officer was shaking his head before the short question was even fully asked though.

"Not as far as we know, no spike in radiation at least, and not much of an EMP. We'll have something up shortly to find out if there is any radiation up there more directly of course."

That was a relief, at least partly, and the General relaxed slightly. The world was not going to end, at least not that night. He nodded towards the phone he had just been using. "The Pentagon wants you and your team out there. The Canadians are going to cordon off the entire area; we're already saying it was a tanker that blew up in mid air. Give you a cover to work under while you find out whatever in Sam Hill that was." The other officer nodded and turned to leave, only to be stopped by the General's voice. "And Greg? Keep your eyes open on this one, whatever it was, it got right through all our early warning stations."

Major Gregory Sims, officially Air Force, unofficially Majestic, nodded at that and saluted his old friend. He agreed with the General, the big black man had a feeling about this one, and Gregory, no one called him Greg to his face except his father, had long come to rely on those feelings.

The Osprey that took the team on the last leg of the journey north was not a warm one. Julie McGrath was thankful she had brought her winter gear on this little expedition north, along with all her other equipment. True, it was nearly April, and spring was coming to most of the continent, but the nights would still be damn cold where they were heading. The small redhead zipped the front of her green parka up a bit more as she thought about camping in snow. God, she hoped there wouldn't be any snow left wherever it was that they would establish base. The winter had been a long one, and she wanted it to be over, wanted to smell the living things growing once more.

Gregory was up front, crouched between the pilot and copilot in the relatively new flying contraption. *Probably making sure they understand where we're going to be dropped off, not like that time down in Ecuador, God that had been a screw up.* Even without the fact that they had stumbled onto the private little fortress of a drug lord, the entire mission had been a write off

from the start, and she did her best not to think about the friends who had not come back from that one. At least this time they wouldn't be setting up base camp in a jungle, inside of a country in which they had no right being. This time they had been invited in by an ally, and, luxury of luxuries, were going to be based out of a town just south of where the explosion had occurred, by the name of LaTuque.

A logging town, nearly at the end of the road up here, and as close as they would be able to get and still be in semi civilization. It even had a small airport, more of a runway with a few outbuildings, but it was much better than nothing. She smiled slightly as she saw the small airport begin to take shape ahead, and below, them through the window. At least there would be hot showers, and with that she was partly satisfied.

Ten minutes later, the large, oddly shaped, engines at the tips of the Osprey's wings rotated upwards, and the aircraft slowly touched down. It was impressive; she had to give it that, a true VTOL. The other two Ospreys were only a few minutes behind them, and she eagerly grabbed hold of her duffel, dragging it with her out of the Osprey, a few steps ahead of the Major.

"I hope you didn't drag me out of bed and bring me up into this cold weather because someone saw Bigfoot, Major." She had to shout to be heard over the roar of the Osprey's engines, but Gregory heard, and grinned. The large black man looked as innocent as he could. "Now, Julie, would I do that to you?" Julie's snort of disbelief was all the answer she would give to that, as she headed away from the Osprey towards the small group of vehicles that had begun to pull up at the limit of the airports parking area.

Julie groaned softly as she sat down in the now overflowing restaurant. It had been a long day, and all she wanted to do was eat something and go collapse in her room. Thank God she ranked high enough to get her own room; most of the privates weren't that fortunate and were triple, and even quadruple bunking. Everyone, at least, agreed on one thing though, it was worth it to sleep inside.

Officially, Lieutenant McGrath had been assigned to the American search party as an observer. The real reason she had been assigned was because of her work for Majestic. Around half of the hundred or so American troops and support personnel who had arrived up here were looking for the non existent Air Force KC-105 fuel tanker that was being used as a cover story for the explosion. They made up Alpha squad under a rather officious army Captain, by the name of James Seymore, control. Major Gregory Sims was in control of Bravo squad, who was actually looking for whatever it was that had blown up a day and a half ago now.

Both of the squads had set up shop in two of the metal hangars at the edge of LaTuque's small airport-- LaTuque, meaning, literally, 'the hat'. The name still caused Julie to grin every time she heard it. Now, almost all of them were packed into the only nearby restaurant, which was attached to the motel that they had virtually taken over. The owners at least seemed overjoyed, as she watched a buxom woman who spoke nearly no English bustle around refilling cups of coffee

and taking orders. All of their rooms were full, and they were virtually guaranteed lots of restaurant business for the duration of the Air Force's stay up here.

Hers was the only table in the restaurant with any empty chairs at it. Her light green eyes regarded those three empty chairs with a touch of an old sadness in them. It wasn't that the men she worked with didn't like her, it was just that they found her talents unnerving, and tended to give her a wide berth. The men of Alpha squad, none of whom she had ever met before, had, it seemed, picked up on the unconscious signals from their fellow men-at-arms, and all of them had nodded politely to her as they passed, going to other tables. Julie sighed slightly and self-consciously made certain that the thin leather gloves she almost always wore, were on well.

A small commotion at the doorway drew her attention away from studying the contents of her cup of coffee. Both of her eyebrows drew upwards slightly as she saw the stranger being led towards her by the buxom owner. She was dressed fashionably in a dark pair of jeans and a white turtleneck, under one of the near full-length, dark Kanuk winter coats, which were popular up here. The room around them faded as green eyes met blue in startling contact. Julie could lose herself in those eyes, and almost did before the hostess was standing before her and asking, in her broken accented English if Julie would mind if someone shared her table. Julie could feel the blush starting to spread across her cheeks as she shook her head. No she definitely would not mind.

Awkwardly, she offered the woman, *dear God she is tall, must be near six feet*, her menu of the restaurant's offerings. There was no mistaking the woman's bearing. She had to be military, probably one of the supporting personnel, or maybe intelligence. The woman's voice, when she spoke, was a surprisingly low tone, which made Julie smile for no reason that she wanted to look at too closely.

"Anything good here?"

Emily was certain that in another life she had been a very evil person. That was the only thing she could come up with to explain why she had picked this restaurant to come to. A restaurant filled with soldiers, almost all of who were still wearing their fatigues. Doubtlessly here searching for, what was it that the U.S. was saying had caused the explosion? Oh yes, one of their airborne refueling tankers. She had just been about to try to sneak back out of the place when the beaming hostess had descended on her. Lady Emily Burtin Windstar, Guardian, Lady of Whitestead, second in line for the imperial throne, Sword Commander, was no match for the French-Canadian lady who had nearly dragged her over to the only table in the entire place that had any free chairs around it. A table, her baser instincts were quick to point out, which was occupied by one of the most stunningly beautiful young women she had ever seen in her life.

It had been a touch over six decades since the Tiri had reached this new world called Earth, and begun preparing for what would inevitably follow them. With modern regeneration techniques, a Tiri, and now a human, could be expected to have a life expectancy of nearly three and a half centuries. Guardians, with their abilities and merging with a ship half, could live even longer,

although almost all of them eventually died as the dangers of space travel eventually caught up with them. One could avoid the odds for only so long.

Even though she had not even reached the first century of her life, Emily often thought that her eyes showed the weariness which sometimes weighed down on her soul. There was a touch of that in the woman's eyes across from her, as they studied each other for the brief second after Emily had taken a seat and the hostess had bustled off.

For some reason, she had been forced to try to fill the awkward silence, which settled between the two of them. She found herself slightly nervous and, to her surprise and her tablemate's, had blurted out the first question she could think of.

"Anything good here?"

The redhead's grin returned at that question, and Emily found herself answering the grin without any conscious thought. The redhead seemed to be about to say something when a young man, *probably the buxom woman's son*, Emily thought, came over and put down a nearly overflowing plate in front of the redhead. He beamed at the two of them, teenage hormones sitting up and taking notice of the two beautiful women who he was supposed to serve.

"The Club Sandwich looks good."

Emily's attention was snatched back from the boy as the redhead spoke for the first time, laughter in her eyes as she looked at the huge plate in front of her. "The coffee is good too." Her voice was cool and controlled, something in it making Emily think of tempered battle steel, hardened by fire. Wiping wherever those annoyingly distractive thoughts were coming from away, she nodded towards her tablemate's plate.

"I'll try a Club Sandwich and a cup of coffee then."

The teenager nodded quickly and hurried off to place the order, grinning to himself. Now if he could only get a picture of the two of them he would be all set, a hit with his friend at the very least.

Emily for her part was trying to see what other smart question she could come up with as she studied the woman seated across from her. As it turned out the woman beat her too it, as took a bite out of one of the sandwiches, swallowing before she spoke.

"You here because of the KC-105?" The amusement had not died down in the woman's eyes, and Emily forced herself to smile slightly in answer as she watched the woman dig into her food. Her manners were perfect, if a bit absent-minded. Whatever else she was, she projected a sense of class.

"Sort of. I'm here informally."

She kept her answer as vague as possible, sensing the sharp intellect, lurking behind those amused green eyes, which were still studying her. Her answer seemed to satisfy her companion and she nodded in seeming understanding as she began on another bite of the sandwich. Wiping her hand on a napkin, she held it out to Emily.

"Pleased to meet you, my name's Julie McGrath." Her grip was firm and warm, and Emily smiled as she shook the leather-gloved hand.

"Nice to meet you, Lieutenant, I'm Emily Windstar." Julie nodded, seeming to take it for granted that Emily would have been able to read her rank from her uniform. They both paused as the waiter returned and placed Emily's order in front of her, and then refilled both of their cups of coffee. Emily's eyebrow arched as she watched Julie empty two packets of sugar into her cup, followed by two more, and then another two.

"Always like things sweet?"

Her tone was amused, and she grinned as she saw the hint of a light blush cross the other woman's face.

"Never really liked the taste of coffee, but its all we have usually, so I just add enough so I don't taste it anymore."

Julie looked up with a bit of defiance in her eyes, which quickly was replaced by genuine humor as she saw the grin on her companion's face.

"Like yours hot and strong, hmm?"

She motioned towards Emily's cup with her spoon, just as Emily raised her cup and took a sip. It took a bit of self-control to avoid coughing on her coffee at that, but she managed with a mock stern look at Julie. Emily for her part hadn't a clue why she was almost flirting with the woman sitting across from her, but for now she just smiled innocently in answer.

"Julie, thought I would find you here."

Julie's smile vanished as she looked over Emily's shoulder towards the rapidly approaching form of her boss, and the files that he was carrying. *So much for my dinner and a nice hot shower afterwards.* The Major must have gotten the enhanced images from the Valkyrie spy sat.

Emily sensed her mood and her smile disappeared as she turned around to see who it was that was about to interrupt their dinner conversation. The tall black man who was marching towards them from the doorway was holding several manila folders, and walked with the air of one long accustomed to giving and receiving orders. She knew that air well enough; she saw it in the mirror a lot.

"Looks like your dinner break's over, hmm?"

Julie just shook her head slightly in answer to Emily's murmured question, and straightened slightly in her chair as Major Sims came to stand by the side of their table. His eyes missed little as they appraised the woman eating with Julie, and he shot a curious look towards the young Lieutenant.

"Major Sims, this is Emily Windstar, Ms. Windstar, this is my superior, Major Gregory Sims."

Julie had watched with fascination as Emily's face had carefully gone blank under the Major's appraisal. She had seen that look before on diplomats who didn't want to reveal what they were thinking. Whatever Greg thought, his face was its usual stoic self as he firmly shook Emily's hand. With a last glance, as if to make certain he would remember her face, the Major turned to Julie and motioned to the files he was holding.

"Sorry to disturb your dinner, but we have some new information to go over."

He was careful not to say more than necessary in front of a person he didn't know, but she could guess the rest. They had found some of the wreckage, and Greg wanted her to take a look at the new sat pictures with him before they went out to the site.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Windstar, but duty calls and all that."

Emily simply nodded and wished them both luck as Julie stood. Her gaze was thoughtful as she watched the Major and Lieutenant head back out. Leaving most of her sandwich behind she stood only a few minutes after the two had walked out and paid her bill. Unlike the Air Force people, she couldn't just walk out with the understanding that it would all be billed at once to the U.S. Government.

She paused just inside the door, watching through the window as Julie and her Major got into the first vehicle in a small convoy, which was waiting outside of the restaurant. Watching the convoy, four Humvees, two troop trucks, and a large tractor trailer truck with what looked to be a mobile command post attached, she tapped her fingers on the glass doorway, her eyes distant as she weighed options.

With a small nod to herself she reached a decision, and pulled what, to anyone else, looked to be a small cell phone from her pocket and rapidly punched in a string of numbers.

"Angwar, where are you?"

Chapter Three

Julie and Major Sims had gone over the new recon pictures on the way. It had been a bit challenging considering that there were no paved roads north of the town, and they were traveling over logging roads towards the target area. The pictures themselves had come from a second Valkyrie sat, the first one's optics having been burnt out by the explosion.

What the pictures had shown was a crash site, nearly two miles in radius, where flaming debris from the explosion had fallen. The only reason they didn't have a forest fire on their hands was the snow cover still on the ground.

"So, you're saying something separated from the main body of... whatever that was, before it blew up?"

Julie peered a bit more intently at the pictures in front of her, long having mastered the trick of trying to read maps, or look at photos, in a bouncing vehicle. She was now looking at the enhanced pictures from the first Valkyrie, and it was obvious that a large chunk had separated from the flaming shape before the explosion. The shape itself was obviously a delta wing design of some sort, and the fact that it was so very obviously an aircraft of some sort had only served to heighten the mystery.

"No sign of whatever this is yet?"

She looked up just long enough to see the Major's head shake, and then bent back over the photos, using her small pocket flashlight to illuminate it.

"No, no sign of the large object. Intel says they think it must have blown up in the explosion which followed."

His tone showed exactly what he thought of Intel's assessment of the situation and Julie spared a moment to grin at her superior. They both had similar feelings about Intel after that trip to Columbia.

"And what do you think?"

The Major seemed to frown slightly as he thought over what information they did know, which was precious little so far. With a small shake of his head, he looked back at Julie.

"I'm still trying to make certain that this isn't another little Black Ops bird."

Julie nodded, that had happened twice before to them, and she knew it was pointless to get excited before they had arrived on the scene and she had a chance to look at the actual wreckage.

"We have the site sealed off?"

That brought a grimace from the Major as he leaned forwards slightly, bracing his elbows on his knees.

"No. The helicopters got diverted on the way north, I'm more than a little annoyed at whoever managed to countermand my orders. I put a call through before we left. It's been straightened out and they should be here in a few hours."

Julie hid a wince at that, and went back to studying the enhanced images in front of her. Getting the Major annoyed was a sure fire way of having a very bad day, and she almost pitied those pilots. She did, however, feel sorry for whoever it was who had diverted their air support. They were going to be in a lot of trouble if the Major managed to track them down.

Without the helicopters it meant that they were limited to land travel for this little trip. Which shouldn't matter, as long as no one was trying to get to the crash site ahead of them.

Five hours, and a couple hundred miles of worse and worse dirt roads later, the convoy arrived in the general area of the wreckage. Julie was not the only one who gratefully stretched as she got out of the Humvee and stepped into the bitter cold of the early morning. It would be another three hours or so before the sun rose, but she could already hear orders being given to the troops who were piling out of the trucks. It must have been a cold and very unpleasant ride, and most of them looked relieved that it was over. The command truck was being set up, its braces had been extended, and she watched as the sides extended outwards to make room for its crew to enter. Powerful floodlights rose from its roof and illuminated the entire area around it.

The first of the thirty or so troops on patrol duty headed out to begin to try and secure the large crash area. When something blows up over a mile up, what comes down is invariably spread all over the place. There was going to be a lot of people walking around with metal detectors soon enough she imagined. For now she headed for the small group of people standing around the Major. Until the first piece of wreckage was retrieved, she didn't have anything to do.

Four kilometers away from the scene, five nearly identical SUVs pulled to a stop on a small, seldom used logging road. Each of the vehicles had been custom built, and they only looked like SUVs from the outside. If one of them ever got into a wreck, it was going to be hard to hide what was in them. All of that was far from her mind as Emily waited tersely for the sensor tech in the back seat to finish scanning.

The young man shook his head and glanced up at the three others in the lead car who were waiting for him to say something.

"No sign of any helicopters, at least as far as I can find on this."

Emily sighed slightly in relief at that. Thank the Maker that Isabelle had managed to reroute them, it would give them a few hours at least. She knew that the small vehicles sensors, which sat on its roof camouflaged as a roof rack, didn't have much range, but they were the best they had for this. If only they could risk a fly over with a scout ship, they would be able to pinpoint every single piece of debris along with the missing escape capsule. As it was, doing a fly by with this much activity in the area was not a smart idea, even with a stealth scout ship. So, here they were, doing a ground search, and hoping to at least get their people out and destroy the escape capsule before anyone found it. None of them were ready for humanity at large to find out that they existed.

"I have lots of activity to the northeast of us, must be the American search team."

He paused as he made some minute adjustments to the screen, which was usually hidden in what would have been the glove compartment of a normal car.

"Sorry, Ma'am, I still can't get a reading on the escape capsule. Nothing we have in orbit can pick up anything on passive scans either, if we could do an active scan I might be able to find it for you, but without it..." He just shrugged, and Emily nodded with a sigh, it couldn't be easy, just once. An active scan was far too likely to be picked up by the military, and maybe a few of the radio telescopes, even if they didn't know what they were looking at.

"It must be damaged for its emergency transceiver to have stopped working, or they shut it off for some reason. How close would we have to be for you to pick it up on these scanners?"

"Without going active?"

The tech looked at her with a near pitiful look on his face. Telling them that they could only search with passive sensors for something this specific, which was powered down, was like telling a blind man to describe the colors painted on a wall by touch alone. When she just eyed him, he sighed and shrugged.

"Half a kilometer, maybe a bit more depending where it came down."

Emily groaned, and the other two in the vehicle winced at that. The tech for his part just shrugged once more and went back to trying to coax a bit more data from his handicapped sensors. If there had been a power source they would have picked the capsule up a few hundred kilometers away, even on passive. As was, they would have to do a very slow search indeed.

"Keep an eye on the Americans and let me know if anything changes. Lets start a search grid where we think the capsule came down, thank the Maker it should have fallen a few kilometers short of the rest of the debris. Signal the others and tell them to move out. Make certain that they stay away from the Americans. The second those choppers show up we're going to have to get out of here."

The tech nodded and relayed her orders, his position doubled as communications officer, as the driver pulled out and headed towards what was supposed to be another logging road a little ways ahead of them. They drove without the headlights on, keeping as low a profile as they could manage in the early morning darkness. The windshield glowed a dim green from inside, working like a huge low light scope, and giving the driver a clear view of everything ahead of them.

Emily glanced back towards where Angwar sat in the rear seat beside her. She grinned slightly as she saw how tense he was. He never had enjoyed these cloak and dagger missions, as the humans called it. Ironically, humans were much better at these more subtle approaches than most Tiri would ever be. Whatever else their faults, the Tiri people as a whole, generally disliked having to hide. *Which is why these last sixty-six years have been so trying on some of us*, she thought.

"When was the last time you ever heard of an emergency transceiver failing on landing?"

Her question was rhetorical and they both knew it. Angwar simply shrugged slightly as he double-checked that the med kit at his feet was ready to go if need be.

He spoke up only after a few moments of rather bumpy driving, "never, unless the escape capsule is nearly totally destroyed. You know what goes into burying those transceivers into them. So either the Americans are right, and the escape capsule blew up before getting far enough away, or..."

He shrugged once more and settled down, trying to keep an eye on what the sensor tech was doing. Emily nodded grimly... or, they had, for some reason, shut off their own emergency transceiver, for what reason she didn't quite know yet. They had less than two hours left before the helicopters reached the area, they would have to be gone by then, or risk having to answer some very uncomfortable questions.

It only took twenty minutes before the first sizeable piece of wreckage had been located only a short distance from where the command truck had set up shop. As per her orders, the piece wasn't touched or moved from its spot once the men had found it. Major Sims came with her as the men called in the piece and its location over the squad's TacNet.

The piece was half buried in the ground, surrounded by a small area of melted snow. The Major and the others hung back as she approached it, stripping the thick gloves off her fingers as she neared it. She seldom went anywhere without wearing at least a thin pair of leather gloves, it helped to keep her talents under control. Now though, she tugged the gloves off and stuffed them into the pockets of her winter parka before crouching down next to the mangled piece of metal. Its surface was scarred and twisted from an obvious explosion. Bits of what looked to be a sort of wiring were visible inside of it, mostly melted and fused together. Casting a quick glance over her shoulder to make certain that Gregory was keeping the others away from her, she braced herself and placed her hands on the cool metal.

Julie could remember the first time she became aware of using her talent. Her third grade class had taken a trip to a rebuilt warship from the American Civil War. She had placed her hand on one of the original ship cannons, felt its texture, sensed its past, and had started screaming. Her teachers had said it was almost as if she had suffered a seizure. She had been hospitalized for three days afterwards, barely able to eat, and wanting to sleep all the time. The doctors had ordered every test they could think of, but in the end, all they could say was that she might have a sort of epilepsy. It had been two years, almost to the day, later that her parents had died in a car accident, and, somehow, the government had gotten a hold of her. From then on she had been part of Majestic and its mission.

The memories flickered across her awareness the second before her fingers grazed the cold metal before her. As always, she had to clear her mind to find what she wanted. When she had first started working with Major Sims she had tried to explain what it was like, but there really was no

way to tell someone else. It was simply a merging with the object before her, when her own consciousness joined with the object she was touching. This time it was a bit harder than usual, but as always, she managed it. Then she only had to urge the metal to "remember" what had come before. She relived its fiery descent, the explosion, and the final flight through the atmosphere, the cold darkness of space, and the lack of any heat. Further back, through its many trips, and even further back to when it was molten metal being formed into an alloy, and then crafted into its final shape. The further back she went, as always, the less and less distinct the images became, until it was a mere blur at its beginning. But it was enough.

Greggory was waiting for her when she sat backwards on her heels, drained and slightly wobbly. She gratefully took the water flask he offered her and nearly drained it, before shakily standing to her feet. Only a few minutes had passed, but she felt as if she had run miles with a full combat pack.

"You're getting better at that you know."

Julie nodded, still weary, but already starting to feel better as she began eating one of the several chocolate bars she carried for just this reason.

"I know. I'm not sure if that's a good or a bad thing though."

By unspoken agreement they would wait until the soldiers had secured the wreckage for travel and taken it away. Stepping aside, they watched silently as the pieces were loaded onto stretchers and began to carry it back to the command post while Julie devoured another candy bar. When they were finally alone, they began slowly walking along the trampled path back towards the command post.

"The pilot was human, I'm certain of it, but I don't know what the passenger was, he felt like he was human, but there was something odd about him. The ship came here from the asteroid belt, and I'm pretty sure it's been to Mars and the dark side of the Moon a few times."

She went on to try to describe the things she had seen, but the rest was mostly fragmentary. The Major listened silently, except for an occasional grunt here and there throughout everything she had to say. She liked that about the Major. He always listened all the way through a report, and then only asked questions once it was done, not stopping a person every other word to ask questions about what they had just said.

"You're certain about it having traveled through space before it crashed?"

She nodded as the floodlights mounted on top of the command post came into sight.

"And that one of them was definitely human? Were they both onboard when it blew up?"

"I'm positive that one of them was human, yes. As for where they were when it blew up, I don't know, but they weren't onboard when it exploded, I'm certain of that much."

The rest would wait until they got inside of the command post, and Julie could tell that the Major had many more questions. She could only hope that she had enough answers to give him about what she had seen. They were just about to climb up into the mobile trailer when one of the Humvees pulled up with a screech of tires and a soldier piled out yelling.

"Sir! Sir! We found something I think you better come see for yourself!"

Emily and the others had rendezvoused after an hour long, quick, but thorough search of the grid area where they had been certain the escape capsule had come down. She watched with a bit of impatience as the sensor tech double-checked all of the information that each of the modified SUVs had picked up on their search. After a moment, he shook his head and turned around to look at both her and Angwar.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am, we aren't showing anything at all."

Emily sat back, and her gaze was thoughtful as she took a look out of the door window at the darkness outside. They only had another hour, give or take a few minutes, before the American helicopters reached the site, and they still hadn't even found a trace of the escape capsule. Things were starting to get a bit tight.

"Alright, what do we have in orbit that you can link up with?"

All three of the others in the car stiffened slightly at that. It wouldn't be calling in a scout vehicle to take a peek at what was going on, but it was close.

"Ma'am, we would have to power up one of the sensor platforms in high orbit, and have it take a peek at what was going on down here. It would have to take an active scan to get anything."

She knew that of course, and her blue eyes were pale when she looked back at him. Angwar knew better than to start trying to change her mind when she had obviously reached a decision.

"How long would you need for a good scan?"

The sensor tech, sensibly, decided against pointing out any more obvious things to the Guardian and swallowed.

"A good four or five seconds, Ma'am."

Angwar winced at that one, five seconds was a lot of time when talking about these sorts of things. He leaned over slightly and murmured to Emily as the driver and sensor tech took it upon themselves to be busy at whatever it was they were fiddling with upfront.

"That's a big risk, what if they manage to spot the platform when it powers up? We can do a laser uplink, but even then, it's a risk."

"And what about the Master Sergeant and the pilot, Angwar? What about the escape capsule? If they get a sight of the platform, all they will be able to see is a small power spike, they won't know anything for certain. They find that escape capsule, there's no way we'll get a chance to explain that away."

Angwar didn't look happy, but he nodded slowly. If it were the only way, he would go along with it.

"Link up, do what you can to keep it as short as possible though."

The sensor tech nodded, happy that he hadn't managed to annoy the Guardian too much earlier.

"Yes, Ma'am, it will take it a few minutes to power up, and then we can do the scan and power down. Total time, I figure, maybe at most five minutes."

Emily nodded and leaned back in her seat.

"Do it."

"Sending power up signal and authorization code. Longbow acknowledges power up request. Platform is beginning to power up, power up sequence will be completed in three minutes, forty five seconds."

Emily settled back for the wait, while Angwar shook his head and talked into a small communicator, disguised as a cell phone, to inform the other teams to stand by.

Julie and the Major rode for only ten or so minutes further up the logging road that the command post had been set up on. The Humvee's headlights illuminated the snow covered ground before them, and the tires crunched through the snow as it did when it was cold out. They pulled to an abrupt halt next to another of the teams' Humvees, and the driver quickly got out and began jogging into the woods.

"Its over this way, Sir!"

The Major and Julie both followed him up and over a small rise in the forest floor, which the road paralleled. Three other soldiers were already waiting for them at the top of the rise, and they joined them there, under pine boughs still coated with snow from the last storm.

Julie stumbled to a halt as she took a look at what the soldiers had found. There was a deep ravine in front of them, probably cut into the land by an old river that had since disappeared. It was a hundred feet or so down a rather steep wood covered slope to the bottom, and the structure.

There really was no other word for it, for she had never seen something that even vaguely looked like it. There was a cluster of small buildings around the base of the thing. The structure itself was a set of four metallic spires, which rose towards a point at the top. Hanging from the top of it was some sort of, what looked to be a six-sided crystal. The top of the structure was just about at eye level with them, which meant that the entire thing was a hundred feet tall, but Julie could spot no obvious braces between the spires. Each of which seemed to have been made from one continuous piece of metal. That, however, wasn't the most disturbing part. The crystal, which hung from between where the spire met was not attached to them, it was simply floating there.

"What, the Hell, is that?"

Julie's voice was almost an awed whisper as she looked at the structure in front of them. The Major seemed to take it a bit more in stride.

"It must be new, no way the loggers would have missed this if it were here when they were logging in this area. Soldier, radio base and get everyone else up here."

The private nodded and began trying to raise the command post with the portable radio that he had slung over his back. A few seconds later he looked to the Major in apology, and shrugged.

"Sorry, Sir, I think we're being jammed somehow."

The Major took it in stride as he pulled his side arm and double checked to make certain that the magazine was full.

"Private Sanders, go back to the command post, tell Lieutenant Coldwell to grab everyman he can spare and bring them up here, direct the helicopters to get up here when they can also."

The private, the same one who had driven them out from the command post, hurried back down the ravine and towards the parked Humvee. Within moments, they heard the vehicle rumble to life and start to turn around to head back the way it had come. Which was when an odd-looking delta shaped craft rose above the tree line, hovering nearly silently, and blew the Humvee into shrapnel. Julie had only a moment to realize that it looked vaguely like the vehicle in the spy sat pictures, before the fireball lit up the night sky.

"Scan in ten seconds, Ma'am."

The Sensor tech was hunched over his instruments, ready to urge the sensor platform into making the quickest scan of the area that it could in the shortest amount of time.

"Angwar, make sure the others keep an eye out for anything out of the usual, like those American helicopters." Even though they weren't due for just under another hour, she never did believe in taking things for granted. Angwar nodded, and deftly relayed her orders through the small communicator to the other four vehicles. Even as he was doing so, the sensor tech rapidly

entered a series of commands, and the screen in front of him filled with data. A moment later the sensor platform powered down, and he began studying the data in front of him, a frown crossing his face after only a few seconds of studying.

"Ma'am, we got something odd up here, look at this."

She leaned over between the two front seats to get a look at what the tech was pointing at. What she saw was something that should not be there at all. There was a local dampening field around a small area to the east of them, which the sensor platforms powerful active sensors had easily cut through. What they had revealed was the unmistakable signature of a nearly completed communications array. They also showed the unmistakable form of an escape capsule loaded onto the back of a logging truck.

"Shit. Angwar, tell the others to arm themselves, and alert Longbow of what we just found."

Her voice was deadly calm as she pointed at the array.

"Get us here, now."

"Ma'am?"

Emily leaned over the front seat to see what the scanner tech was pointing at, for a moment she thought he was pointing at the communications array, but then she spotted the small dots to the side of it.

The Americans were already there.

"Get us there, fast."

The driver took one more look at where the Guardian was pointing and headed out, moving at speeds which were reckless upon the rutted dirt road that they were traveling across. No one in the vehicle complained. If the people at the array had Tiri weapons, the Americans were about to be slaughtered.

Angwar had a terse conversation with someone at Longbow base, and then looked towards Emily.

"They're getting the rapid reaction team moving, the soonest they can be here is in twenty minutes."

A fireball lit the sky ahead and to the right of them, and Emily grimly began pulling weapons from the recessed compartment in the trunk. Two Mark V rifles and four dart pistols per vehicle, it would have to be enough for now. They didn't even have a set of un-powered battle armor.

The Americans at that moment were in a bad spot. The Major, Julie, the radio operator, and the other surviving Private, had taken cover wherever they could find it. Julie was trying to take a peek at what was happening from behind the snow-covered boulder where she had nearly thrown herself after the first explosion. The destruction of the first Humvee was rapidly followed by the second one going up in flames, and Julie was now trying to see what had happened to the aircraft that had been attacking them. The worst part was that it had been almost totally silent as it had hovered there, and she had lost it in the darkness of the night once it had finished firing whatever that odd pulse had been at the second Humvee.

The camp below her, at the bottom of the ravine, had come alive as well. People were spilling out of the prefab structures. Floodlights had come alive, lighting up the entire area down there. She did a quick count and came up with worse odds than she wanted. A good dozen or so men, armed with what looked to be assault rifles, were making their way up the ravine towards them. She could just see the Major giving orders to the two Privates with him, both of which thankfully had their M-16s with them, although the radio operator was again trying to raise someone from the command post. The major had crouched down behind the base of a tree trunk, which split into two separate trunks a few feet above the ground level. Both of the Privates had taken cover behind an old deadfall, the one without the radio was sending three round bursts down the slope towards the men climbing, with the Major taking pot shots with his pistol as well.

Julie had found her 9mm pistol clutched in her hand after she dove for cover, with no clear memory as to how it had gotten there. The figures climbing the steep slope towards them were pausing every now and then to fire blindly at where the four of them had taken cover. The light from the camp below caused odd twisting shadows all over the place, and all of the rifle fire was missing, for now, although a few rounds splintered the dead tree trunk that the Privates were hiding behind.

Julie took another quick look around the boulder and squeezed off a few shots of her own, smiling as she saw one of the shapes climbing up the slope fall. She didn't know if she had actually killed him or just wounded, but at least it was one less for now. They would have to move soon, she knew, or they would be surrounded. The only problem was the flying craft, she still hadn't seen it, and trying to move if it was waiting for them to show themselves was akin to suicide. She watched in confusion as one of the figures down below raised up an odd looking pistol, and shot four flares into the air, the red light illuminating the entire area.

The man's actions became horribly clear when, like a silent wraith, the delta shaped craft raised itself up above the tree line across the ravine from them. It shifted slightly, and Julie could swear she saw what looked to be a cannon of sorts mounted on its underside swivel. The muzzle glowed white for a split second, and then a streak of light leapt from the craft and smashed into the log where the two Privates had been hiding. The log simply disintegrated into a thousand flying wooden shards of burning shrapnel. The two men who had been behind it were tossed into the air like broken dolls, to land forgotten where their owner dropped them, dead before they hit the snow.

Julie was moving before she knew it, making the quick, hunched-over run to where the Major was cursing, a two-foot shard of wood sticking out of the calf of his right leg. There was no time.

If the cannon could do that with only one shot, the pitiful cover that the two of them had taken would be of no use. Grabbing the Major's arm she slung it over her shoulder and started dragging him back towards the road, half stumbling as they topped the small ridge, and then began stumbling and sliding down the other side. A quick glance over her shoulder showed that the silent aircraft had disappeared, and she could only pray that it had gone somewhere, anywhere, else. The Major was muttering something as he tried to staunch as much of the blood flowing from his leg wound as he could as they moved, still leaving a trail of crimson behind them.

At least, once they topped the ridge, they were once more in darkness, out of sight from the floodlights in the camp at the bottom of the ravine. If they could make it across the road, maybe they would be able to follow it back towards the command post and get help. Or maybe, Julie thought bitterly as she helped the Major through some brush, that's where that flying thing went, and they're all dead.

The Major helped as much as he could, but he couldn't put any weight at all on his right leg, and she was beginning to tire even as they made it past the still burning wreckage of the second Humvee. It was only ten feet to the other side of the road, and the trees, which beckoned them with safety. Julie forced her muscles to half carry the much larger Major as they started across those ten feet. It was the longest ten feet Julie had ever tried to walk in her life, and they had only made it halfway across when the light was suddenly bathed in a bright light.

There was nowhere to hide, nowhere she could drag the Major to in time, and her thoughts became oddly still and calm as she turned slightly to see the hovering shape a bit further down the road, that had just lit up the entire area with its spot lights. Time seemed to slow as she raised the pistol, that she had somehow kept in her right hand, and shot at the floating specter of death. The Major raised his as well and fired with her, both of their bullets having no effect whatsoever, and Julie could see sparks where the bullets simply bounced off the armor of whatever that thing was. With a yell of frustration she emptied her clip at it, hoping against hope that she would hit something vulnerable. They were toying with her and the Major; she knew that much as she saw the cannon on the underside shift to track both of them. They could have destroyed us anytime, and they just wanted to have fun chasing us around a bit, the bastards. Even her thoughts were detached as she squeezed off the last bullet, aiming at the cannon this time, and watched without surprise as the bullet bounced off the belly of the craft with a small show of sparks.

When the mouth of the cannon glowed faintly, she knew she was about to die, and she could only watch in fascinated horror as her death came.

So it was with mute surprise that she watched as the entire right wing of the craft exploded outwards. The craft began a slow dive towards her left, just as the cannon fired, destroying a tree nearly six hundred feet further down the road. This time she saw the second streak of light, which slammed into the belly of the craft, from further down the road behind the craft. This time, what was left of the craft exploded into a brilliant fireball. The shockwave arrived a split second later, flinging both her and the Major backwards against the wreckage of the Humvee. She felt a sharp pain blossom at the base of her back, and the world went black.

Chapter Four

There was a bright light shining against her eyelids, and Julie tried to turn her head away from it. The darkness had been so soothing, and she didn't want to wake up yet, but a voice was calling her name and the darkness didn't want her anymore. Cautiously, she opened her eyelids a slit, immediately wincing as the light sent lances of pain through her head.

"Oh God, that hurts," was what Julie tried to moan when consciousness returned, but instead managed a mumbled sentence that sounded more along the lines of: gahmphrt. A glass of water was pressed to her lips and she carefully sipped a bit of the cool water. Ambrosia had never tasted that good, she was certain, and she let out a soft cry of protest when the water was taken away after she had only taken a sip or two.

"It's alright, but you can't drink too much yet. Sleep."

The voice was warm and caring, and she dimly remembered having heard it before. She instinctively trusted it and closed her eyes, besides, she was suddenly tired again and this time the darkness welcomed her back.

The second time she woke up, she was feeling much better, and she managed to open her eyes without more than a wince at the light. This time the voice wasn't there to greet her when she woke, and she felt alone. Carefully, she tried to focus her eyes on her surroundings. She was lying on her back, in what felt like a hospital bed. There were warm sheets pulled up around her, and she was wearing some sort of pajamas, which felt almost like silk. The walls and ceiling were of the same warm beige and off white colors, and she managed to lift her head slightly to take a look around. She was in a small room, with a strip of light above the bed, mounted on the wall. There was a door leading into what she assumed was a bathroom, and another larger door with a window set into it, looking out onto probably a hallway.

It had the universal feel of a hospital, and Julie let her head fall back upon the soft pillows with a sigh. Waking up in hospitals after a mission was starting to become a rather worrisome trend on her part.

Just as she was about to try and find out if she could sit upright, the door to the room opened and a familiar face entered, bearing a tray and smiling. For a second she couldn't place where she had seen the face before, but the fog that had clouded her thoughts was thinning and she answered Emily's smile with a small one of her own.

"Ms. Windstar."

"Glad to see you're back with us Lieutenant. You had us and Major Sims worried for a little while there."

Drawing a chair over with her, Emily sat down next to Julie's bedside and placed the tray, which, Julie suddenly realized, was emitting some very pleasant smells, on the table next to her.

"How are you feeling? The Doc said he would be by in a few. He had another patient to check in on."

The voice was the same one from her memories, low and soothing, and Julie smiled a bit wider in answer.

"I feel like I got run over, what happened?"

"You remember the explosion?"

Emily watched her carefully at that and Julie had the feeling that there was more to that question than she was letting on. Frowning slightly, the red headed nodded slowly, even that movement causing a dull ache to spread across her head.

"I remember that flying thing, whatever it was, about to kill us. Then it just blew up, and I guess I got flung backwards by the explosion."

Emily nodded and helped her sit upright, careful not to jar her, as she propped up the pillows and got Julie situated just right.

"Here, the Doc said we could get some food into you finally."

Julie's stomach more than agreed with that, and she blushed as her stomach made noises. Emily just grinned and put a folding tray table down in front of Julie, then transferred the tray with food on it onto that.

"Looks like fish and vegetables, along with some juice and a bit of jell-o for you tonight."

Julie was surprised to find out how hungry she was, and she immediately began eating, waving to Emily to stay seated when it looked like she was about to leave.

"No please, stay."

Emily grinned and stretched out her legs, who was she to argue with a patient? Some of the fatigue from the last two days must have shown on her face, for Julie looked at her appraisingly for a few moments before starting to eat again.

"Tell me what happened? Where am I for starters? Is the Major all right? What was that thing? And those people, why did they start trying to kill us?"

Emily held up her hands to ward off the barrage of questions and pointed towards the tray of food in front of Julie.

"Eat, and I'll try and answer your questions."

The redhead grinned a bit sheepishly at that and nodded, beginning to work on the rather good food once more. *Not bad at all for hospital food*, she thought, as she tasted the fish.

"First off, you are at the Imperial Base, Longbow. You've been here two days now. We had to bring you back here because you impaled yourself on a bit of wreckage from what the Major says used to be a Humvee. Don't worry, the docs fixed the damage, and you're as good as new, or will be anyway. That's part of why you're so hungry, the Re-gen techniques take a bit out of a person."

She held up her hand once more as she saw the young woman open her mouth to ask even more questions, and she sighed.

"I'm not doing a very good job of explaining this am I? All right, let me start at the beginning, or as much of the beginning as we have time for. Then, after I'm done, you can ask questions, deal?"

Julie nodded, her food momentarily forgotten as she waited for the stunning woman across from her to start. Emily fidgeted for a few seconds, trying to organize her thoughts. Finally she locked those pale blue eyes onto Julie's, and started.

"I guess I better start with telling you about where we came from. Tiri Prime is located about four hundred light years from here...."

Julie had just managed to get the shirt she had been given buttoned, when Major Sims knocked and then entered the hospital room. The doctor, an elderly man with pure white hair who had introduced himself as Dr. Bingwar, had been in earlier and pronounced her fit enough to leave. She was glad to see that the Major's leg seemed to have been taken care of, for he hardly limped at all when he walked, and it had only been three days since the incident in Quebec. Julie had spent the last day in sort of dazed shock.

It wasn't often that one's world turned upside down. *And here I thought I knew pretty much what was going on*, she thought with amusement as she could see the lingering traces of the same shock on the Major's face. At least she was not the only one who had her world rattled.

"Glad to see you're up and about, Julie. I'm about to head to Washington, as you can imagine some people are going to have to know what happened."

Julie nodded in understanding. Most of it could be covered over, but the circle of people who knew about the Tiri was about to grow by small leaps and bounds. Something which had everyone that Julie had met so far, on edge, especially Emily. Her new friend, my friend, yes I suppose she is my friend, had been strained the last time she had seen her for breakfast. As far as she understood it, the Emperor had not been happy with the entire escapade. That was another thing; her new friend was the daughter of the Emperor, whoever that was. That alone would have

been mind blowing, then you couple it with everything else, and she was amazed that she wasn't sitting in the corner babbling.

"I'll get my things together, Sir."

She was surprised when he shook his head.

"You're staying here, Julie. Emily has asked that you be allowed to remain as a liaison between Majestic and the Tiri. Seems that Majestic has been one of the few organizations that they haven't managed to get someone into. Emily's older brother will be joining me in Washington and we'll see about talking to the President."

Julie frowned slightly at that, and perched on the edge of the bed as she thought about what the Major was saying.

"This is going to ruin that timetable that the Tiri are trying to follow, isn't it?"

"Only if it gets out of hand. We should be able to explain everything, even the orbital strike they used to take out that transmitter. Meteorite."

He answered in response to her raised eyebrow at the last bit. She had been unconscious at the time, but the Major had assured her that the orbital strike that Emily had called down on the ravine had been spectacular in the early morning light. Julie nodded, it could be done, and she had even taken part in a few of those little cover-ups. It was the other part that was worrying her at the moment though.

"Do they have any leads on who the traitor is, or where the rest of the missing equipment is?"

The Major was about to answer, when the door behind him swung open and Emily entered the room. She nodded in greeting to the Major, but her eyes were locked with Julie's as she answered the question she had half heard upon entering.

"No, we don't. An orbital strike doesn't leave a lot of evidence behind, which is of course part of the reason we wanted one."

The Major grimaced slightly in answer to that. Unlike Julie, he had seen what the orbital strike had done to the buildings and communications array inside of that ravine. The medic working on his leg had cheerfully advised him, that it had been a small kinetic strike, no explosives used at all.

"Julie and myself will be taking a small tour of the other bases to ask a few questions. The Sergeant Major's report gives us a few clues to work from, and I've already detailed an investigative unit to look into things."

Julie and Major Sims had both heard that the Sergeant Major and the pilot had been found shortly before the orbital strike had been called down. They were being held in one of the

buildings, apparently waiting to be transported elsewhere for interrogation as to how much the Sergeant Major had learned. At the least it was an indication that he had been on the right track, and someone was nervous. The humans, who had been guarding the array, little more than mercenaries as far as they had been able to find out, had been easy prey to the Tiri weapons, which had been brought to bear against them. Once the silent thing, the modified atmospheric shuttle, Julie automatically corrected herself, had been taken out, the mercenaries had little chance of escaping and had surrendered finally in the face of the superior firepower, which the Tiri had with them.

"I came to tell you that your transport is waiting, a good old-fashioned helicopter just like you asked."

Emily grinned towards the large black man that she was starting to like. She offered him her hand, which he readily took and shook.

"My brother and a few of the Emperor's aides will be meeting you when you touch down. I wish you luck with your mission, Major Sims. Go with Honor, Wisdom, and Strength."

Julie could just catch a glimpse of a waiting Private outside in the corridor, and the Major nodded.

"Thank you, Lady Windstar, I expect I'll be seeing you again shortly. Stay in touch, Julie, I want to hear from you every day at the least."

After he had left, the two of them looked at each other a bit uncertainly, until Julie suddenly remembered a question that had been bugging her for a while now.

"You know, you never told me where we were."

Emily seemed relieved to answer a question, and to fill the slightly awkward silence which had just fallen between them. Holding open the door, she escorted Julie out into the well-lit hallway, and towards the lift doors at the end. They passed by a nurse station, with banks of monitoring equipment that Julie could only guess at. Half of it looked like it had come straight off a Star Trek movie set.

"You're out of here, so why don't I just give you the mini tour? In answer to your question though, we are at Longbow Base, located just south of the Canadian border in the state known as North Dakota. We aren't that far from a town called Vang."

Julie eyed her questioningly at that. She already knew that the entire base was underground, and had been here for the last sixty some odd years, but why had the transport flown over Quebec on its descent from the North Pole, instead of flying over Manitoba, which was a direct line.

"Why did your shuttle go over Quebec then?"

Emily returned the palm over chest salute of the guard who had been posted outside of Julie's room and smiled. It hadn't taken the human long at all to come up with that one.

"You're Ballistic Missile Early Warning System, that's what has kept us from doing direct descents for over two decades now. There's a gap in the line that we can take advantage of in northern Quebec. We have to usually do a fast descent down through the gap, and then angle westwards to come over here, or zigzag across the country to whatever our destination is."

The lift was waiting for them when they arrived in front of the metal doors, and Julie had the feeling that she was missing something. The question was just on the tip of her tongue, but Emily's next words distracted her from it.

"You ready for the grand tour now?"

Chapter Five

Emily and Julie wound up in the Nova after the tour was done, the underground complex's communal cantina. They were seated on the bottom floor of the structure; above them was an open area straight up past the three other balconies, which formed the rest of the seating for the cantina.

It isn't a base; it's an underground city. Julie shook her head as she looked at the sprawling seating arrangement around her as she waited for Emily to finish talking with the officers who had cornered her a few minutes earlier. While she waited, she took a sip of the water that one of the servers had brought over, and stretched her feet, thankful for having finally sat down. Her body didn't ache anymore, but she was still tired. The tour had taken hours.

The entire complex was built under farm ground owned by a series of shell corporations, which if she understood it correctly, was how almost all of the land under which Imperial Bases had been built had been acquired. The base itself was sprawling, and she was certain that they had avoided a few areas, which had simply been considered to security sensitive. Which hadn't kept her from seeing dozens of underground buildings interconnected by tunnels. She had seen most of the main hospital, a communications and command building, along with several underground hangars bustling with activity. Other parts of the tour had been carefully skimmed over, and Julie had to resist a smile at how Emily had guided her around what she assumed were weapon storage buildings.

They had made their way back to the central building from which most of the rest of the complex radiated outwards from, and Emily had brought her to The Nova. It was an interesting place; she had to admit that much. The bottom floor was a restaurant, with what Emily assured her was good food. The upper two open balcony levels were self-serve from lines of buffet tables along the walls, and people were constantly coming and going, snatching a bite to eat.

Emily hadn't said, but Julie was guessing that there were upwards of a couple thousand people in this subterranean world.

"Sorry about that."

Julie smiled as she watched Emily slide into a seat across the table from her. Whatever else she had learned this day, she had taken pleasure in watching her new friend move. The flowing grace that the taller woman seemed to exude in every movement had been a pleasure to watch. Julie's wandering thoughts were abruptly brought back to the present when she realized she was staring at Emily, who was watching her with an amused expression. *I am so very busted*, Julie thought as she ducked her head and tried to pretend to read the menu in front of her.

Emily, for her part, grinned and relaxed in her chair, enjoying the blush that was spreading across Julie's face. Both of them ordered quickly when the young server came to the table, and Emily's smile faltered slightly as she remembered the conversation she had just had with Angwar and the two other officers.

"Seems that my brother and your Major are meeting with the President this evening. My father is worried enough about how this situation is bringing us out into the open before we are ready, that he is coming here from Mars Base as soon as possible."

Julie leaned forward at that, and matched her friend's worried frown.

"You think this is going to get out of hand then?"

Emily shrugged, and waited as the server filled both of their glasses of water before answering.

"Depends what the traitor is going to do next."

Julie's confusion must have shown, because Emily sighed and sat up a bit straighter, entering what Julie was privately starting to call her lecturing mode.

"I told you about the plague that wiped out most every Tiri who was on Tiri Prime right?"

Julie nodded at that, trying not to think about a virus that had a kill rate of over ninety five percent and was airborne. It would make Ebola look like the common flu.

"I didn't tell you how it got released though. The Bak'ra were being held at the borders of our space. We had lost some of our outer colony worlds, but we weren't crumbling like they had come to expect. I think most of that comes from the fact that we were more advanced than any other species that they had conquered up until then. Anyway, we weren't falling aside. True we were having all sorts of trouble trying to fight as an organized unit, Guardians have traditionally operated independently, but we were holding them. A sensor net that was an engineering marvel protected the home system, nothing was going to get in or out of there by warp gate without system command knowing about it.

"I'm the first to admit that we may have come to rely on it a bit too much for planetary security, but it was a very good sensor net. Somehow, though, a Bak'ra ship managed to slip through it and, we assume, dusted the planet with the virus. The thing had nearly a two week long incubation period, and by the time symptoms started showing up, the infection had spread to all the colony worlds. Only those ships on deep space duty, or who had been lucky enough to be between systems when the outbreak was recognized managed to avoid it."

Emily paused to take a sip of water, and Julie could see the lingering pain and anger from those days in her eyes.

"It was only pure dumb luck that the Emperor had decided to tour the battlefield with my older brother and most of his advisors. It was kept very quiet, for obvious security reasons."

This time Emily paused as the young server brought over their food. Emily had ordered trout, with a large salad. Julie herself had gone with steak and a small mountain of French fries. She still felt like she had spent a week fasting, and she found a craving for meat, which the doctor had said could be expected. When the young man, who, Julie noted with amusement, had a bit of a hero worship complex for the Guardian, had gone, Emily resumed her story between bites of food.

"The Emperor gathered up everyone who had not been infected, and began an evacuation. We'd had some scouts through this system about a hundred years ago now, and we knew it would be a good place to try and stop the Bak'ra. They would eventually have come this way to try and take over this planet as well, and it was decided we would try to hold them here.

"There wasn't much left of Tiri Prime when we passed through it, the Bak'ra were only a jump behind us, so we had to hurry, but we downloaded nearly all of system command's data base on the way. There was no way a Bak'ra ship could have gotten through the net without help. Most of us hoped that whoever the traitor was had died a very slow, bloody and painful death during the plague."

Julie watched as her friend's blue eyes seem to pale further, becoming as cold as space as her gaze focused onto another place and time.

"But you think that the missing equipment, and the Communications array, mean that whoever it is, is here?"

She touched the back of Emily's hand in an attempt to call her friend back from whatever bleak and bloody place she had gone to, and was rewarded with a small smile.

"Yes. The equipment we found was from the missing transport. The problem is that there is still half of the equipment missing. We didn't find all of it."

Julie was silent for a moment at that, playing idly with a French fry, as she considered Emily's words.

"What could they do with one of those communication arrays?"

Emily shook her head at that, as she frowned once more.

"That's the thing, they couldn't do very much at all. Not with the Sensor Sphere in place."

When Emily had first explained this Sensor Sphere to her on the tour, she had been nearly blown away by what the Guardian had said. The Tiri, knowing that the Bak'ra would almost immediately begin to search for the fleeing Tiri fleet, had taken steps to make this particular solar system as innocuous as possible. That meant, no more man made signals could be allowed to be sent into space, which a passing Bak'ra scout ship could pick up.

The solution, from a Tiri point of view had been simple. The construction of a sphere of sensor arrays about the same distance from earth as the outer reaches of the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. It had taken them several years to construct, and place, the hundreds of small stations, which were needed, but they managed it. Each station had two purposes. One was to keep an eye out for any possible sign of a Bak'ra scout ship, or fleet. The second, and its main purpose, was the jamming of any signal, radio and otherwise, being given off by inhabitants of the third planet in the Solar System.

Julie had just stared at her as she had calmly described the sphere and how its construction had been less impressive than the sensor net around Tiri Prime. Immediately she had pointed out a flaw in her friend's plan.

"What about all of the probes that we've sent past the asteroid belt? Voyager One and Two, The Galileo, and all the others?"

Emily had grinned, slightly embarrassed, as she led her through another training building.

"Well, you see, we sort of relay those signals in a tight beam, and make certain that as little as possible is radiated into space. We do the same with the radio waves your astronomers keep looking at in their radio telescopes."

Julie had just stared at her for a few more moments, and then narrowed her eyes.

"You're the reason that Hubble had all those problems aren't you?"

Emily had been taken aback by the sudden accusation, and couldn't help but grin at the near outrage showing in Julie's green eyes.

"Well, we couldn't let you get a good look at some of those "Asteroids" which had a metallic gleam could we? We fell a bit behind in our work to disguise the sphere stations, so something had to be done."

"What else are you people responsible for in way of our space programs problems?"

Emily had smiled a bit more weakly at that one and her answer had been a bit hard to hear, but Julie had heard it.

"You blew up the Mars Probes!"

Julie managed to get herself back to the present before she missed the rest of what Emily was saying. Her friend was studying her plate with a thoughtful look, and speaking as if she was just thinking out loud.

"If they managed to shut down a part of the sphere for a bit, they could send out a powerful enough signal that the Bak'ra would have to be pretty blind to be able to miss it. The question is why would they want to do that?"

To that question, Julie had no answer, and she simply squeezed Emily's hand, which she had somehow taken into her own somewhere over the last few minutes, in silent support.

Emily smiled as she felt Julie's hand slip into her own, it felt so very right to be there, except for one small detail.

"Julie, why are you wearing gloves?"

Emily held up Julie's hand as proof and nodded towards the black leather gloves that she had been wearing whenever she had been conscious. Emily was fairly certain that she knew the answer, but she wanted to make certain. She smiled as Julie looked anywhere but at her hand, still trapped by Emily's fingers, and obviously tried to think up an answer.

"Well, its just, I mean, I have this, umm... my fingers are cold?"

Emily just arched an eyebrow at that. The entire base was kept at exactly sixty-eight degrees, no matter what the temperature outside was. She just continued to watch Julie with what she hoped was an understanding expression until green eyes peeked at her from under auburn hair. She must have managed it, because Julie relaxed slightly and began speaking a bit more normally.

"I have this, well, talent I guess. I can pick up, its sort of like, well, ummm... images of its past, after I pick up things. Only when I pick up objects though."

She hurried to add on that last part, and Emily could tell she had gone through more than one fearful reaction to what she had said before. Emily tried not to grin and she was the one, this time, who offered silent support.

"I just can't control it too well, and I get these random images if I don't wear the gloves when I touch things."

Emily nodded in perfect understanding and she waited until Julie once more met her eyes before speaking.

"It will only get worse as you grow older, unless you learn to control your gift."

Julie's mouth opened, and she made some interesting squeaking noises, which Emily decided were quite cute. Whatever she had expected, she hadn't expected Emily to say that.

"We call it a gift, and those who have it strong enough, become Guardians."

Emily couldn't help but grin at the astonished expression on Julie's face.

"Why do you think everyone keeps calling me a Guardian?"

She sobered though, and with surprising tenderness laid Julie's hand back down on the tabletop.

"We are going to have to train you though, Julie. You must have the Gift very strongly to be able to pick up images of an object's past. It allows us to merge, at least partially, with most machines. Then of course there is the matter of our ship self, but I won't get into that now. For now though, I would be honored if you would let me take you as my student. Back home we had a training program and schools for Gifted, but I'm afraid that here we can't do much more than basically apprentice those Gifted that we find, we can't even bind you with your ship self, at least not yet."

Julie was just staring at her, still in obvious shock as she finished speaking. Emily offered her a crooked grin, and waited patiently. It was a lot to take in, in such a short time, but she had no doubts that Julie would manage it. She just needed a few minutes to get her thoughts in order, which Emily gladly gave her as she went back to eating.

It took all of three minutes, Emily timed it, before Julie looked at her curiously and asked her first of a torrent of questions.

"What do you mean ship self?"

Chapter Six

A trans-orbital flight was not as exciting as Julie would have thought. Which was probably because she had been asleep when they had finally gotten clearance to take off. Exhausted by the lessons, which Emily had insisted, they begin immediately after dinner. Emily had emphasized control over her gift, and had purposefully begun exposing her to objects which were nearly overwhelmingly soaked with previous emotions, trying to teach her how to deaden her perceptions at will. She had then shown her some of the other aspects of her gift, which she would eventually learn to use. The ability to control anything with electrical connections was an interesting one, and Julie was looking forward to learning that lesson.

By the time it had been time to go, Julie had been drained, mentally and physically, and had only enough energy to stumble into the delta winged transport and collapse into a seat. She hadn't even had enough energy to question where they were going.

Several hours later, she had been awakened by turbulence as the small craft began its descent. Quickly, Julie tried to blink the sleep from her eyes and stretched as she took in her surroundings. The rear cargo hold of the fifty-meter long craft had been fitted with seating for passengers, although Emily and her were the only two hitching a ride at the moment.

Emily was paying no attention at all to the descent, and was going over what looked like a small notebook-shaped screen with writing scrolling across it. Julie took the opportunity to study her new friend unnoticed. Something she had been wondering about suddenly pushed its way into the forefront of her thoughts and she asked without even thinking.

"Why are you human?"

Emily looked slightly surprised at that question and looked over at Julie, grinning as she did so.

"Good morning to you, too."

Julie could feel the slight blush spreading across her cheeks, but she really did want to know.

"You heard me, why are you human? Shouldn't you have six arms or something?"

Emily couldn't help but smile at that.

"I rather hope not, I have enough problems with two sometimes."

Julie scowled at that.

"You know what I mean, why are you human?"

"Well... I'm not, I'm Tiri, if you remember?"

Julie eyed her at that, and she could swear that Emily was doing her best not to laugh at her. Narrowing her eyes she pointed at her with a mock scowl.

"Why are you human-like, then?"

Emily couldn't help but laugh this time, and Julie crossed her arms, scowling for real this time. Mornings were not her favorite times of the day, and she still felt sleep deprived. The laughing Guardian seemed to notice that she was getting a bit annoyed, because she managed to calm herself down, still grinning though.

"Well, we share pretty much the same genetic information. You humans are not the only race we've come across that are basically the same as we are, although you're the most advanced we

had encountered by the time of the Bak'ra invasion. The best we could come up with is that the different planets across this arm of the galaxy were seeded by some unknown race with the same genetic material."

Julie looked at her a bit puzzled at that.

"You don't know who?"

Emily just shrugged in answer, and deactivated the pad that she had been reading, setting it aside.

"Your guess is as good as ours. We've come across ancient structures here and there, but always abandoned and empty. The archeologists usually referred to the race as The Ancients."

The pilot leaned through the narrow opening to the cockpit at that, and nodded to both of them.

"Guardian, we are about ten minutes out from Kithkarn Base, and we have authorization to land."

Emily nodded in answer, becoming once more military in bearing and attitude.

"Please send my respects to Nicholas, and ask him to meet with me when we land."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Julie looked curiously towards Emily at that, wondering where they were headed now that she realized she hadn't a clue. It must have shown, because Emily grinned and motioned towards the front of the shuttle, clearly meaning the place they were headed towards.

"We're on our way to Kithkarn Base, located about a hundred kilometers east of Australia."

"Emily, that's the Pacific Ocean."

To Julie's alarm, Emily smiled and nodded.

"Exactly."

The human watched the Tiri expectantly, but when the Guardian said nothing more, she sighed and asked the other question that had been bothering her.

"Why are we going there again?"

"One of our sensor stations picked up a blip that may or may not be a Tiri power source somewhere down here."

"Somewhere?"

Emily shrugged, returning her attention to the small viewport by her seat.

"Somewhere in Australia."

Chapter Seven

Emily was up and swinging her legs over the side of the bed before she even realized what had woken her up. Even as she stood and headed towards the chirping sound that had awakened her, she did a quick check with her ship self. Even literally a world away, her tie still held. No one had ever found out how far the tie between Guardian and ship-self would hold, but distance wasn't the problem. The problem was time, the longer away a Guardian was from his or her ship self, the weaker the tie became, and eventually the Guardian began to suffer actual physical pain. Thankfully that took upwards of a week to reach dangerous levels, less of course if the Guardian in question was wounded or weakened somehow. Still, it was comforting to mentally probe the ties which bound her to her ship self, and feel only a bit of unease. It was an automatic action; similar to probing a tooth with your tongue when you suspected it would hurt.

Mostly awake, she managed her way across the small room and activated the communications panel. Yawning, she eyed the person on the screen and scowled at the smirk she saw in return.

"Nicholas. Remind me to thank you for these fabulous quarters you gave me and Julie."

If anything, Nicholas's smile grew larger in answer to that scowl.

"Well, if you had sent warning I could have made certain that our guest quarters weren't all taken. As is, you're lucky you got separate beds, with all the personnel that we've got here this last little while. Or are you just upset with me because you got a room with two beds, instead of one?"

Emily's scowl darkened and she cast a glance over her shoulder towards the other single bed in the room, and the still sleeping figure on it, before growling in answer.

"Nicholas, I love you like a brother, but if you don't tell me why you woke me up, I'm going to have to come up there and snap your neck."

The other Guardian raised his hands and grinned disarmingly.

"You never were at your best just getting up. I just thought that you might want to know; the scout ships are on the way back. They didn't see anything out of the ordinary, but we'll go over their sensor data when they get back here. Your brother sent word that things are going as well as can be expected in Washington, and he thinks that things can be kept under cover. He also said to tell you that your father will be arriving in two days time."

"Fine, we'll meet you at the command deck in half an hour. How long until the scout ships get back?"

"A half hour or so."

Emily nodded and reached for the console under the panel, speaking as she did so.

"Good, be there in half an hour."

She punched the off button before Nicholas could get in any remark about her using the word, we. He could be more than a little abrasive this early in the morning, and Emily didn't feel like strangling him in front of Julie.

Stretching she groaned, and shook her head to try and wake up fully. Her body was still on the time she had kept back at Longbow. It felt like early morning to her, even though it was, she glanced at the muted chronometer set below the communications panel, getting towards early afternoon in Australia.

"Julie, it's time to get up."

She was rewarded with a grumbled answer that sort of sounded like, two more minutes. Her new friend was obviously not the best early riser, and Emily grinned as she ordered the lights on, and headed for the shower. There was a muffled curse behind her, and she chuckled as she closed the door behind her.

A quick shower, and various other morning rituals, she emerged to find Julie groggily sitting on the center of her bed, with two sets of uniforms spread around her. She leveled a dark gaze at Emily.

"You are an evil person, Guardian. Here, Nicholas sent these down."

Emily barely managed to avoid ruffling Julie's hair as she took the uniform from her, she just looked too darn cute with her short red hair all mussed up like that, and still half asleep.

"Shower's all yours if you want it."

Julie yawned and trudged towards the bathroom, while Emily did her best not to grin, and took a look at her uniform. Nicholas had sent her a new Guardian's uniform, and she gladly put the black with silver trim uniform on. His choice of clothes for Julie was interesting to say the least. It wasn't exactly a Guardian Trainee's uniform, but the dark gray top and black pants were close enough.

"Good thing I like you Nicholas, or I'd have to hurt you now."

The shower was, thankfully, nothing alien looking, and she had an easy time sorting out how to adjust the setting for water temperature. *I hope they have coffee, or this is going to be a long day*, was her only thought as she stepped under the near scalding spray and slowly started to wake up.

Shampoo and soap had been laid out on top of a folded towel, and she grinned at Emily's thoughtfulness. Her hair had started to feel sticky, and she luxuriated in taking enough time to slowly wash her it.

She assumed that they were going to meet again with Nicholas and find out what the scouts had found, or not found. *I hope they found the missing equipment. The way Emily talks, I'm positive we don't want to meet these Bak'ra any sooner than we have to.*

Rinsing herself off, she felt almost human again, and after brushing her hair and teeth, she felt fairly awake also. Putting on the clothes that Nicholas had sent down for her, she emerged to find Emily talking to a flat screen that was set into one of the walls of the quarters they had shared last night. *Thank God we had separate beds, I don't know how much sleep I would have gotten if we had been sleeping side by side.* The thought had come unbidden, and Julie scowled, forcing it back to where it belonged. The two of them hadn't said anything about the connection she felt between them, and she was almost afraid to ask if Emily felt the same thing. There were times when she caught the Guardian watching her, and she could swear that she felt it, but other times there was nothing. *Maybe Nicholas can tell me a little bit about her, he's known her long enough, I wonder why he calls her Emie.*

"Weston, you know as well as I do that we simply aren't ready to combat the Bak'ra. The asteroid infrastructure isn't even completed."

The man on the screen looked enough like her, with the same jet-black hair and stubborn jaw, that Julie had no problems guessing that it was Emily's brother. He shook his head and sighed.

"Emie, you know as well as I do that this time we may simply have no choice. Father is going to do what he can, but these Americans are certainly not going to just forget that anything happened. Humanity has evolved since we arrived, maybe we should work with them in the open to prepare?"

Emily's frown was deepening all through her brother's answer and Julie folded her arms across her chest. She had been wondering the same thing herself.

"That's Father's decision, and the Senate, if we still had one."

It seemed to be an old argument, and the brother opened his mouth to make a counter point when he looked towards where Julie was standing. Drats, I was hoping that thing only showed the person they were talking to, but it apparently didn't, and Weston smiled.

"I take it that you are Julie McGrath?"

Emily looked over her shoulder, and offered her a wry smile, standing and motioning her closer.

"Julie, I would like to introduce you to Imperial Prince Weston Windstar the Third. Weston, this is, indeed, Julie McGrath."

Weston seemed to offer her a small bow, and Julie had to grin at the mischievous look in Emily's brother's eyes.

"Emie has told me so very much about you, Ms. McGrath. I am certain that we will have the pleasure of meeting you in person soon."

There was a call from in back of him, and Weston turned slightly to look at something that was out of the field of view of the screen. He nodded and turned back to face them.

"Sorry, Sis, seems that Major Sims and I have an appointment to keep with the Pentagon. Father sends his regards, and wants you to come and have dinner with both of us after you sort out the missing equipment business. Be careful, Emily, I don't like the way this is shaping up."

"Don't worry, Weston, I don't like it either. It smacks of involvement by someone high up. I'll keep you posted on what I find out, and yes, I'd love that, as long as we are finished by the time Father gets here."

Weston grinned at that and winked to Julie.

"Bring your friend along also, I think Father would love to meet her, and be certain you don't kill Nicholas, he is acting on Father's orders. Bye."

The screen went dead before Emily had a chance to respond, and Julie watched with amusement as her friends eyes narrowed.

"You know, you are going to have to tell me why all these people keep calling you Emie."

Emily visibly winced at that and shook her finger at the display panel where her brother had just been.

"They only call me that because they know they can get away with it. Come on, we have to get up to the command deck. The scout ships should be back, and we'll take a look at their sensor data. I wonder what he meant about Nicholas only acting on Father's orders."

Julie nodded, the smile disappearing as she grabbed the pocket book that she had brought with her, and her service revolver, which Emily had returned to her before they had left Longbow. Emily had almost been thinking out loud at the end of her response, and Julie wondered what indeed the other Guardian was up to.

"Did they find anything?"

"No, but we'll go over the data to see if they missed anything. Two gifted people like us, we should be able to spot anything out of the ordinary."

Julie hoped that Emily knew what she was talking about, because she wasn't sure if she could be any help at all for what the Guardian was talking about. Stepping out of the quarters, Julie turned

back to ask that very question, when she stepped right into one of the two guards who were stationed outside. Both of them were in what she had come to recognize as full combat gear, unpowered armor, those heavy looking drum magazine assault rifles, helmet, and those odd looking side arms. Emily deftly caught her on the rebound, it had been like stepping into a brick wall.

"Sorry, I wasn't paying attention."

The Marine, who had turned slightly at the bump from behind, only grinned and then snapped to what looked like attention, gripping the rifle firmly, as he spotted Emily. The other Marine did the same, and Julie was a bit surprised to see that this one was a female.

Emily was still holding onto her shoulder, and Julie took a glance up at her friend's face, not particularly surprised to see what was rapidly becoming a familiar scowl on her face.

"Marine, why are the two of you standing guard at the door to our quarters?"

"Ma'am, Guardian Nicholas requested that we be your Honor Guard, Ma'am."

Emily let out a long suffering sigh at that, and then suddenly seemed to notice she was still holding onto Julie, and quickly released her.

"Honor Guard?"

Emily started walking stiffly towards the lifts at the far end of the corridor, and Julie had to struggle to keep up. The two Marines just a step or two behind her. She was beginning to think that Emily hadn't heard her question, but as soon as the lift doors had slid closed and Emily had told the computer to take them to the command deck, she turned towards Julie. Her voice was tinged with a bit of embarrassment as she answered.

"Nicholas is being annoying, that's why I have an Honor Guard, but not for much longer."

Julie just raised an eyebrow at that, and glanced at the two silent mountains of equipment that were standing in front of the lift doors. Her friend hadn't seemed too surprised to see the two of them, and had seemed to expect it that they would follow the two of them into the lift. As the doors of the lift opened, Julie watched as the two Marines stepped out first, and scanned the area with the air of complete professionals before then stepped aside for Emily and Julie to step past them into the command center. The large circular room had dozens of seats along its edge, with people in each of them manning what looked to be communications stations. She gave herself a shake and hurried to catch up with Emily, who was stalking towards the same meeting room they had used last night. Nicholas was already waiting for them inside, grinning.

This is going to be interesting, Julie couldn't help but grin at the obvious look of mischief in the other Guardian's eyes.

"What the hell do you think you're doing assigning me an Honor Guard?"

Emily had used her best threatening tone, but to her alarm, Nicholas grinned.

"You know the rules, Guardians get a personal guard, and so do members of the Imperial family."

Emily was aware of Julie watching with interest, as she began getting herself a plate of food from the small cart of food that Nicholas had ready.

"You know as well as I do, that we don't have the people to spare for guard details!"

Nicholas's smile grew at that and he leaned back in his seat.

"See, that's where you're wrong. True, we didn't have enough people after the evacuation to provide guards for each of the Guardians, along with your brother. We do now though, and orders came through last night that you weren't going to go traipsing into the line of fire without at least a two person Honor Guard. It was signed by the Emperor himself, Lead Guardian."

Emily had been about to demand to know who had sent out those orders, but she snapped her mouth shut at that. If they had come from her brother, she would have had a good chance overriding them. From her father though, she had no choice at all in the matter, so this is what Weston was warning me about. A tad grumpily she sat down across from Nicholas. She always had hated having a group of keepers, as she had called them, go with her everywhere she went off her ship self. She understood the logic of it of course, Guardians were vulnerable if they were out side, kill the Guardian, and the ship self became unusable. Still, she didn't have to like it. She was startled when a plate of food was slid in front of her, and looked up to see Julie grinning down at her.

"Know when to lose gracefully. First Guardian?"

Emily could feel a small grin tugging her lips at the younger woman's words, but she forced a scowl and began to eat. The food was good, Nicholas had become a fan of human cooking it seemed, and the omelet looked very well done.

"I don't have to like it though. First Guardian is just my rank among the Guardians. It doesn't mean that much."

Nicholas laughed at that, and Emily sighed. She knew it was a bad idea to let these two be in the same room with one another. Nicholas, the ever-helpful person that he was, turned to Julie and grinned.

"Our very own Emie here is First Guardian, as well as having been born a Windstar. She tell you about how we were holding our own against the Bak'ra?"

At Julie's nod, he continued, while Emily appeared to be fascinated with the food that she was eating.

"Well, the reason that we were was because Emily forced us to begin working as a unit. Guardians were only used to working alone before that. So, in recognition of her efforts, she was made First Guardian. It did, of course, mean a lot more when there were more than twenty one of us, but it's still not something to sneer at."

Emily finished her toast, and scowled at Nicholas, just as she was about to start in on the omelets.

"I think we have better things to do than to go into all that, don't you?"

Nicholas and Julie shared a grin, and then both of them started in on their own breakfast. They ate quickly, each of them eager to get on with the search.

Thirty minutes later, they each were studying the sensor data from the two scout ships as it scrolled through a screen in front of each of them, set into recessed slots in the tabletop.

Julie was obviously not certain what she was looking at, but both Emily and Nicholas had urged her to take a look along with them. At the very least she would get a crash course in reading sensor data maps.

It took them hours to sort through them all, for the scout ships had done a grid search over most of the interior of Australia. It was a huge area, and there was no way for them to go over each map separately, so they stuck to the ones with any sort of energy or anomaly reading on them.

Five hours after they had started, Nicholas stood, and left to go see about rounding up some food for lunch for them. Julie had given up trying to spot anything an hour earlier, and was now reading bits of the history of the Tiri Empire, pre Evacuation, on her terminal.

Even Emily herself was starting to give up hope. Without any way of narrowing the search more, she didn't dare ask for an active sweep from one of the orbital stations. There was another way to sort through the data, but it was not a very pleasant one.

"Julie?"

"Hmmm?"

"Remember when I told you that there were other aspects of your gift that I would teach you how to use?"

That got her friend's attention, and the red head looked up with interest from the screen in front of her, pausing the display of one of the tactics used in the Miners revolt.

"Yes?"

Emily got up and pulled her chair over with her to sit next to Julie.

"There is something else we can try. It's not the most pleasant way though, not with sensor data that has been recorded on a sensor system that's not part of your ship self. It's sort of like diving into a jumbled mountain of data, and trying to sort it out into something that your mind can make sense of."

"All right, how do we do it?"

Emily blinked in surprise, she hadn't expected such a quick answer, although, considering what she knew about Julie she should have.

"Well, here, lets call up all the sensor information at the console. Then we can get to work on it."

Julie nodded and removed the gloves that she was still wearing. The lessons that Emily had taught her were going to take her a while to use, and lots of practice before she could stand to touch random objects without being bombarded by images.

"Here, now just relax, and focus on picturing an empty pool of water."

Julie closed her eyes and did as bid, trying her best to picture a calm pool of water, with mountains in the background. Emily could feel her stiffen slightly in surprise as she took her hands, and gently placed them down on the control panel beneath the console. Closing her own eyes, she kept her hands spread over Julie's, their fingers loosely laced together.

"Now, slowly, extend your senses like you do when you try to sense an objects past. Let a stream of information flow down into the pond from the console."

Emily could feel Julie's hands tense as she made the very common error of trying to force it. "Calmly," Emily whispered, her thumb caressing the back of Julie's hand unconsciously. "Relax, don't try to force it. Just leave your mind open, but make sure you don't try to accept all of the information at once. Just a small stream, remember."

Emily let her own body relax, consciously letting go of all the responsibilities and the consequences if the traitor somehow managed to get a strong signal out of the system. After more than a half century of practice, it was easy enough to let the stream of data into her mind.

It was hard to explain to anyone who was not gifted, but data, which she collected through her ship self, was sorted in her own unique thought patterns. Data collected through devices that she was not bound to, was organized in a way foreign to her mind, and appeared to her in an almost chaotic way. She could dimly feel Julie stiffen besides her, and the stream of data that she was dealing with suddenly split. Half of the information flowing to another destination, and she could feel Julie's presence suddenly in the base's computer network. She was learning fast, and the small part of Emily's consciousness not busy with trying to sort the data, was proud of her.

Communication between Guardians was seldom face-to-face. Rather, it was often done through streams of data. Since they had come to Earth, none of them had dared have their ship selves active, and Emily had missed the wordless communications, flow of thoughts, overlaid with emotions and comments. It was, Emily had often thought, as close as a Tiri could get to being telepathic. So it was that she tasted Julie's surprise even as she felt her question.

Seamlessly she directed her, showing her the data that was relevant and that which was not. Between the two of them, they sorted all of the data and reconstructed it into a virtual map of the area, which the scouts had scanned. It was tiring work, and even Emily was feeling the strain by the time they had finished. It was worth it though, and Emily showed Julie the area, which was different than the others. Carefully she showed Julie how to pull back, and released her hold on the console.

As always there was the moment of disorientation, when she found herself back in her own body and no longer inside of something that was virtual. She was unsurprised to find Nicholas waiting for them, and a glass of juice put into her hands. Gratefully she drank, as she waited for the bits of random data to slowly fade from her thoughts.

She looked over towards where Julie was sitting back in her chair; her eyes still clenched shut and a glass of juice clutched in her fingers also. Nicholas was waiting as patiently as he could, and Emily ignored him as she reached over and gently placed a hand on Julie's arm.

"You all right?"

Opening a single green eye, Julie nodded, and closed her eye again, wincing.

"Headache."

Emily squeezed her arm in sympathy.

"Drink the juice, it will help, just give your mind a little bit to sort out where it is."

Julie smiled faintly, but kept her eyes closed as she raised the glass and slowly began sipping juice. Nicholas had reached the end of his patience, and waved a hand.

"Hello? Did you find anything?"

Emily, let go of Julie's arm, and reconsidered the "strangling Nicholas in front of Julie" rule.

"Yes, we did."

Making certain that Julie didn't look like she was going to pass out, she reached over and engaged the holographic display set into the center of the table. Dialing up the area that they had seen, she pointed towards what looked to be a perfectly ordinary stretch of canyons.

"This area is odd. The scout craft's sensors picked up some odd readings around the edge in almost a circle."

"You want to light up a sensor platform? We can do an active scan of that area?"

Emily hesitated at that. It would be simpler, but they had already powered up a sensor platform in the last few days. There was an easier way get a good look at the area.

"No, we may as well do a close look in one of the scout ships. This area is nearly a hundred square kilometers across. Let's narrow it down a bit before we start trying to do orbital scans."

Nicholas didn't look happy at that, but he nodded. A scout ship had four places, two for the pilots, and two for the technicians. He had a good idea who would be riding along in the technician's spots.

"I'll go see about prepping a scout ship for launch. You two might want to eat something before you go out."

Emily gave him nod of thanks, and waited until he had left, before carefully removing the empty glass from Julie's hands and refilling it.

"Here, drink some more. Some food will help."

Julie gave her a shaky smile, as she opened her eyes, wincing a bit at the light.

"Thank you. That was quite a ride."

Emily grinned in answer, and offered her the full glass.

"It's just the start of what you'll be able to do."

Chapter Eight

Katya relaxed in the lounge chair, her eyes shielded from the sun by a pair of mirror shades. It was just past noon, and she was restless. It had been two weeks since she had done anything other than practice, and keep her skills honed to a razor's edge. It was frankly starting to drive her insane. So it was with a bit of anticipation that she cracked open a brown eye and watched Micha hesitantly head towards her from the solitary farmhouse that the team had taken over three weeks ago. It was located in the middle of nowhere, and she, for one, couldn't wait to get back to civilization. The sooner the better, as far as she was concerned, she would kill for a hot bath.

With a sigh she sat up and stretched her arms, waiting for Micha to avoid looking at her breasts before speaking in Russian. Her voice was clipped with annoyance, and the young man looked more than a tad uneasy when he answered.

"Yes?"

"The Major just radioed, he found some things out, rumors of a place where no aborigines now go. He says we go as soon as he gets back with the truck."

Katya sat up at that, and grinned. Finally, they would be moving. Even if it turned out to be nothing, as it had the last three times, they would at least be leaving the small ranch house behind, for a while. That was worth something, and she walked right past Micha, heading for the single story structure. Pausing at the windmill to drink some water, she headed inside. She had things to prepare, and equipment to double check. She finally had a clear mission in front of her again, and she could feel the weeks of inactivity beginning to slide off her shoulders, like the release of a weight.

God was back.

Emily and Julie had been squeezed into the back of the teardrop, with small swept back wings, shape of a scout ship. Nicholas, along with Emily's Honor Guard, had reluctantly seen them off, after Emily had pulled rank about the inclusion of fighters into the scanning mission. Even her pulling rank though, had not kept Nicholas from putting a Marine in the copilot's seat, and his best pilot on the mission.

Just before closing the hatch, Nicholas shook his head, and eyed the other Guardian, uncharacteristically worried.

"You know what your Father and Brother will say when they find out that you have done this."

Emily was equally as grave as she offered him a small shrug.

"The longer we give the traitor, the more time he or she has to prepare. We have to find him Nicholas, and you know this is the quickest way."

For some reason, the look on Nicholas's face didn't fill Julie with enthusiasm. With a nod and a salute, which Emily returned, he stepped aside and swung the door closed. Julie watched as hydraulic locks engaged, sealing them into the craft.

Emily glanced over at her as the ship's pilot began his preflight checklist, then swiveled her chair to face her. Julie braced herself for what was to come. They had been through this twice before now, and Julie hadn't backed down then, she wouldn't back down now.

"You should stay here. You shouldn't come with us, it's going to be..."

Julie simply held up her hands, and glared at the Guardian until she faltered.

"One, I am not under your command, remember? Second, you said you would teach me, and experience is a pretty good way to learn. Third, I'm coming with you; so don't waste our time trying to argue with me. You won't win this one."

Pale blue eyes met green, and narrowed. Both of them stared at the other, in a silent battle of wills.

"Ma'am, we're ready to take off. Are you all set?"

The Pilot leaned back and craned his head around the chair to get a look into the sensor cabin. He didn't want to attract the attention of those two who were staring at each other, but Command had granted them clearance to leave.

Finally Emily looked away, and Julie swiveled her chair to face the bank of scanner panels in front of her. Tightening her harness she couldn't help but grin over her shoulder towards Emily. The Guardian caught her eye, and they shared a brief grin, before Emily went back to making certain she had the sensors set up like she wanted. Julie silently chuckled, and put on her own helmet, adjusting the small microphone at the base of her throat like the pilot had shown her earlier.

Activating it, she narrowed the feed so that she would only be heard in Emily's helmet. As the craft passed through the force field out into the ocean, she tried to take her mind off the windowless area she was in by talking.

"Your brother is right you know."

Emily finished her adjustments, and looked over towards her with a puzzled expression.

"Weston? What is he right about?"

"Humans. You're doing us a disservice believing that we wouldn't be able to handle the knowledge that the Tiri exist, and that the Bak'ra are coming."

"Julie, I know you are handling this very well, but do you think that everyone would be able to? It wasn't that long ago that Humans first put someone into space, and your scientists are still debating if life exists anywhere else in the galaxy."

Julie forced herself to think about that as objectively as she could, even as the craft's nose tilted upwards and they began their ascent towards the surface.

"I'd like to believe that we would adapt, as we have adapted to every other scientific revolution so far."

Emily's answer was so soft that she had to strain to hear it over the rushing sound of water outside the hull.

"We can't afford to be wrong on this Julie, people still fight and are killed on this planet over religion, and hatred of people because they are different is not that uncommon. We need humanity's help to stop the Bak'ra from destroying this world, and that will not happen if humanity hates or fears us."

They were both silent after that, Julie as she remembered some of the scenes she had seen, not only in third world countries, but in the United States as well. There were people who would hate the Tiri, and fear them, for what they were. She hoped that they would not be in the majority though. Emily shook her head, as if trying to clear her mind of a bad memory and smiled grimly to Julie.

"If you're coming along for the ride, you might as well be useful. I'll give you a crash course on helping me coordinate the sensor sweeps using our gifts."

The scout craft was hugging the ground, at a bare sixty-meters up, as it commenced its scanning run, moving at a leisurely hundred kilometers an hour. Any lower than that, and it would start to leave behind obvious marks of its passage, an antigravity drive could do nasty things to anything it got too close to. A pilot getting just a bit too low as they tried to avoid radar detection had caused more than one case of unexplained cattle mutilations.

The sleek, teardrop shaped craft had been brought with the Tiri in the evacuation. Only a few new ones had been built in the construction bases which the Tiri had up and running. There were simply too many other things to build, fighters, sensor platforms; it took a lot of resources to just maintain the sensor sphere beyond the asteroid belt. The scout ship's skin, much as the skin of the U.S. stealth fighter and bomber, was designed to minimize the ship's sensor profile. The fact that neither the Bak'ra nor the Tiri had used radar as an actual sensor method in well over a millennia, had turned out to be a problem. The scout ship actually presented a larger radar signature than did the transport shuttles that the Tiri had designed while on earth.

It limited the use of the scout ships, since they simply could not be used over most of the Earth's countries without being spotted. The ships had to fly low, to avoid radar detection, following the contour of the land. This drastically reduced the range of the craft's sensors, which were still further hampered by the restriction of only being used on passive mode. That fact was less damaging than it was with nearly any other ship, however, since the scout craft's had been designed to make the most out of the integrated sensor net, which ran throughout the crafts skin. The craft contained no offensive weaponry, other than the pilot and copilot's side arms. Stealth and speed were the ships best defense.

Emily closed her eyes, and joined Julie in sorting out the massive amount of sensor data, which the craft's sensors were accumulating. Julie was learning faster than nearly any other Guardian Trainee that Emily had ever helped train. It usually took years to for a gifted person to learn how to do what Julie was easily picking up. The fact that she had been using her gifts for years as part of Majestic undoubtedly helped her there. Still, she was very gifted, and Emily was quite proud of her new friend. Starting to lie to our self, are we now, her conscience wouldn't let her get away

with it that easily. All right, maybe I like her a little bit. That was as far as she was going to go with that, at least until after they had found the Traitor, and she ignored the snort of disbelief that her conscience made at that statement.

They were less than an hour into the scanning, when both Julie and Emily found the edge of the area that had the unusual sensor data. The two of them shared a sense of accomplishment, and continued to sort out the data from the sensors. It didn't take long for Emily to realize what they were seeing. The power spikes from specific points all around the area, could only be from one thing. Opening her eyes she touched her mic, and spoke to the pilots.

"Someone is generating a sensor ghost over this entire area. Get me a com link to Kithkarn. We'll narrow down the area a bit, and then use one of the sensor arrays to scan."

The Marine in the copilot's chair worked on the console in front of him for a few moments, before shaking his head and turning around to look towards the Guardian.

"Ma'am, we're being jammed."

Even as he said it, Julie stiffened and yelled out a warning.

"We're being scanned!"

Emily instantly closed her eyes and sliced her way through the data to see what Julie was seeing. Mentally cursing, she kept her eyes closed and spoke out loud.

"We're being targeted!"

The Pilot was a well trained man, and immediately began jinking the craft, while the Marine gave up trying to punch a com signal through the jamming and began deploying the craft's electronic warfare suites. The pilot brought the craft's engines up from a piddling forty percent, to full power, and the craft leapt upwards as he tried to gain altitude and get out of range of whatever was targeting them.

Emily directed Julie, showing her without words, the base that had just appeared on the sensors ahead of them, and the dots of ground to air weapons emplacements, which were targeting them. The energy signatures that had just popped up ahead of them were eight kilometers ahead of them, and had been hidden inside of a fairly deep canyon from the scout's sensors. Both of them saw the heat bloom of the missiles, which launched at them.

"Missiles!"

Emily's shout of warning came a split second before the snarling warning klaxons, which came on in the cockpit. Six missiles in total launched from ground to air weapons pits, which were located around the edge of that canyon.

Desperately both Emily and Julie took over the electrical warfare systems and began trying to jam the oncoming missiles. The problem was that the scout ship's EW suite was built to defeat weapons, which used homing sensors that the rising missiles had never even heard of. The missiles, which were headed after them, were absolutely stupid by Tiri standards, but their payload was not something that the lightly armored scout craft could just shrug off.

Three of the missiles went straight; their heat-seeking sensors didn't even see the scout ship. The three others were radar guided, and the scout ship presented a large enough cross section for them to lock onto. Emily and Julie managed to jam one of them; simply filling its targeting area by giving off a lot of radar signals. The pilot was one of Kithkarn's best, and he pushed the scout ship to its limit, redlining its engines and pulling a sideslip maneuver that stressed its small wings past what any sane engineer would have wanted. The second missile missed them by a good six feet, going past where they had been, and having no chance of coming back around to have another pass at them. The third though, it held onto them despite everything that Julie and Emily could toss at them, and every decoy that the Marine deployed. Its proximity fuse detonated it a half foot off of the craft's left wing. The stress blew the wing straight off the craft, and took half of the engine compartment with it.

The pilot did what he could. Shutting down the engines, and engaging the antigravity engines to stop the sharp spin it had dropped into. Without the engines though, the craft was on battery power only. Antigravity engines are power hungry beasts, and they suck up energy without pause. The pilot was faced with an impossible situation. Shut down the antigravity engines until they were just above the ground, and drop into a spin, from which he might not be able to recover before hitting. Or, he could keep the antigravity engines online, and pray that the batteries held out.

He did his best. Dropping the antigravity engines power levels to the bare minimum, and trying to keep the craft from spinning out. With the main engines out, Emily and Julie pulled out of the data stream, which was rapidly shutting down. The craft was starting to shake itself apart, its small right wing causing enough lift to try and spin the scout.

"Julie! Make sure your safety belt is on tight!"

The young American nodded hurriedly and tugged on her belts, tightening it. She gave the Guardian a shaky smile, and gripped the side arms of her chair tightly. Emily, herself, tugged on the straps and made certain she was ready for what was about to come. She spared a thought for the Sergeant Major, and Ile, they had managed to survive their brush with death by using the transport shuttle's escape capsule. Unfortunately, the scout shuttle had no such built in escape capsule.

The landing was hard, and brutal. Emily had a split second view of the outback rushing up to reach them, and the pilot desperately trying to coax more energy into the antigravity engines. The Marine kept on transmitting a distress call all the way down. Then the ground leapt up and met them.

The craft bucked, bouncing three times along the ground, shedding skin and parts behind it, before it struck an outcropping of rock, and shattered into pieces. The front of the craft simply sheering off from the force of the impact. Emily had watched in horror as the entire forward compartment was ripped apart, before a flying piece of debris struck her and the world went black.

Julie must have blacked out when the craft hit, for when she came to, she was lying on her back, staring up at a blue sky above her. Cautiously she moved her legs, slowly working her way up to her neck. Everything seemed to be in one piece, and she was still strapped into the chair. The chair itself though, was no longer attached to the scout ship. The ship, or what was left of it, she saw nearly a hundred feet away, shattered against the side of an outcropping of rocks which had been thrust out of the ground. A trail of debris and burning parts were strewn behind it in a nearly kilometer long trench.

Her thoughts were scattered, and she felt oddly unhinged as she unsteadily unclasped the safety harness, and slowly climbed to her feet. The scene had an almost unearthly feeling to it. It was a beautiful day, mid eighties, and without a cloud in the sky. The scrubland that they had landed in looked nice, and she would have enjoyed taking a walk in it. Carefully she picked her way through the debris, slowly moving towards what was left of the scout craft. The entire left side of the craft was ripped off, and the cockpit had been shattered off of it. Broken and twisted structural members were sticking out at weird angles.

The Marine was the first one she came across. He had been tossed two-dozen yards away from the craft, and the sandy ground was blood soaked around his body. The man's body had been nearly cut in half by a large shard of metal, just above the waist. The pilot she didn't see any sign of, and her search became nearly frantic as she tried to find Emily.

Horrible images of her friend burning alive inside of the craft, or lying off somewhere bleeding to death, flashed in front of her eyes. Desperately she shoved aside broken paneling, and structural members. Her hands were covered with cuts and bruises by the time she managed to clear enough of a space for her to worm her way into the crushed sensor compartment.

Emily was still strapped down into her seat, thank God. Her head was tilted forward, and her helmet had been bashed in on one side. Julie hadn't even realized she had stopped breathing until she felt a faint pulse at the base of Emily's neck and let out a shaky breath. Her hands were trembling as she carefully pulled the helmet off the unconscious Guardian's head.

She nearly shouted for joy when Emily's eyes opened, and the Guardian looked at her with confusion.

"Wha..?"

Emily's voice was a horse croak, and Julie hushed her, placing a finger against her lips.

"Shh.. It's all right, we crashed. Hold on, I'm going to get you out."

Working carefully she undid the Guardian's safety harness, and began trying to ease her out of the space between the chair and the crumpled compartment. Almost immediately Emily yelled in pain, grabbing Julie's arm to stop her from pulling.

"Where does it hurt?"

"My lag, damit!"

Carefully Julie bent over the cursing Guardian and tried to peer under the shattered console in front of her. With a gasp she saw the state of Emily's right leg, and stood as upright as she could in the collapsed compartment, her face going white.

"Your legs shattered, right above the knee, I can see bone."

Emily grimaced; sweat popping out on her face as she gripped the arm rests of the chair, trying not to scream in pain at the compound fracture, as her shock wore away. Grinding her teeth she managed a growled sentence.

"Med kit, under seats."

Careful not to jar her friend's seat, she bent down and pulled out the white case that had been strapped under her seat. There was blood on the floor, and she moved quickly as she opened the case and started sorting through its contents. The bandages were obvious, but she had no clue what the small little odd looking pens did.

Emily didn't give her a chance to ask, with a whimper of pain the taller woman grabbed two of the different colored pens, and jabbed them into her arm. There was a small hiss, and the overwhelming pain in her eyes faded.

"ohhh.. that's good stuff."

Julie bit her lip as she studied her friend, and the chair she was in. The track that would have let her pull the chair back was mangled, and there was no way that she could straighten it. That meant she had to pull her friend out over the arm of the chair, and she was certain that would do more damage to her leg.

The alternative was to leave her in the scout craft, and she could already smell smoke from the rear.

"Emily, I've got to pull you out of there, all right?"

Emily gave her a brilliant drug induced smile and nodded her head like a little child, holding out her arms towards Julie. Bracing herself, Julie grasped her friend around the waist and pulled her upwards in her seat, and then over the arm of the seat, as carefully as she could. She winced as

she heard, and then saw the exposed bone on Emily's leg rub together, but whatever drugs Emily was on were good ones, and she didn't seem to feel a thing.

The second she was out from behind it, Julie helped her out of the sensor compartment and laid her down on the ground. She was losing a lot of blood, although not quite as much as before, and Julie quickly wrapped the injury with bandages, trying to staunch the flow of blood. One of those pens must have had a coagulant in it, she thought as she wrapped another bandage over the first one, which was not quite as rapidly turning red, as it should have.

Studying the rest of the contents of the med kit she found other objects with writing upon them that she hadn't a clue how to read. Replacing them in the metal kit, she knelt down besides Emily, touching her forehead. Emily's eyes were surprisingly clear of pain as she looked up at her and smiled.

"Sooooooo beautiful."

Julie blinked in surprise at that, and despite the situation, grinned. So that was how to get a Windstar to talk, drug them. The grin immediately faded as she looked at the wounded leg, and then back to Emily's face.

"Emily, listen to me, we need to get you help. How do you signal for help?"

That at least got the attention of the Guardian, who had been staring at the blue-sky overhead with a drug-hazed amazement. For a moment Julie thought that she was going to say something induced by whatever drugs she had just taken, but the pale blue eyes sharpened suddenly and Emily grabbed her arm with surprising strength.

"Listen to me, Julie. They will be coming. Run, go, and find help. Get a message to Kithkarn, get troops here."

Julie shook her head, grabbing Emily's hand in her own.

"No! I'm not just going to leave you here!"

Emily grimaced in pain, and then opened her eyes again.

"Please. Go. They will be here soon. Go, must know what we found. GO!"

The last was a yell, and Julie stumbled backwards, tears streaking down her face even as she knew that Emily was right. She could hear what sounded like an explosion in the distance, and she hurried over to the dead Marine and pulled his sidearm from his holster. Hers was gone, and she had no desire to go hunting for it now. Of course she hadn't a clue how to use the large side arm that the Marine had worn, but she would figure it out.

One last time she dashed back to where Emily was and placed the med kit next to her, where she could reach it. Tears were making tracks down her dust-covered face, but she refused to give in to the desire to sob.

"I'll be back as soon as I can. I'll get help. I swear."

Emily gripped her hand, and nodded; before her blue eyes glazed over once more from the drugs and she let her head drop back into the dust. Refusing to give into the urge to scream at the sky about the injustice of it, Julie bent down and pressed her lips to Emily's forehead.

"I swear."

Then she was off, running towards the scrub away from the crash site, afraid to look over her shoulder, for fear that she would run back and never leave.

Chapter Nine

Nicholas sat in his command chair in the heart of Kithkarn base. The Guardian had been waiting impatiently for the scout ship to check in for thirty minutes now, and it was overdue. He hated being blind, and would have given his right arm to be able to still have his ship self powered up and have the sensors at his mental beck and call.

Fidgeting in his seat, he gave it another thirty seconds before summoning his Provost, Fleet Captain, he mentally corrected himself. The well-built female captain had been only a month at her job before the Evacuation, but she had done well since then. Her stable personality, and patient way of doing things, had helped him countless times. Fleet Captain Shara was not a beautiful woman, by any stretch of the imagination, but she was built like a horse, and routinely spared with Marines, and beat them.

"Yes, Guardian?"

Nicholas sighed at that. No matter how hard he tried, she simply refused to call him by his name while they were on duty.

"No sign of the scout ship?"

She didn't have to ask which scout ship, as she shook her head. Her light brown hair, as always, tied up in a very functional bun on top of her head.

"No, Guardian."

Nicholas drummed his fingers against the side of the command chair, and made a decision.

"We'll power up a Sensor Array and take a peak at what's going on. I have a bad feeling about this."

Shara simply bowed her head and returned to her station. The fact that she had not argued about the exposure that he was giving the Empire by doing that, spoke volumes about her own concern.

"Eric, power up.."

He glanced at the display panel on the arm of the chair, and located the nearest Sensor Array that was in orbit.

"..Array ten."

The young human sensor technician nodded, and sent the warm up signal through the base's land transmitter, located a dozen kilometers away on the coastline of Australia.

"Array will be powered up in three minutes, thirty seconds, sir."

Nicholas absently nodded his understanding, and called up the holographic display located in the center of the command deck. It was empty at the moment, but it would soon show whatever the Sensor Array sent back. He was praying that it would get a reading off the Scout Ship's identity transmitter, and nothing else. If it managed to pick up the Scout Ship, then something was definitely wrong.

Three and a half minutes later, he was pacing.

"Sir, Array is powered up, and beginning scan."

Nicholas stopped his pacing behind his chair, and gripped the back of it, watching the sensor tech as he punched in a series of commands.

"Starting scan of search area... SHIT!"

The holographic tank in the center of the room, which had begun to show the first bits of sensor data that were being scanned, went dark.

"Sir! Someone just blew Sensor Array ten out of the sky!"

"WHAT?"

Nicholas and Shara reached the sensor tech's display at the same time, and peered over his shoulder. The base's sensors easily picked up the rapidly expanding explosion from where Sensor Array ten had once been. Those same sensors, however, had not detected any one firing on the array. With a frown, Nicholas leaned over and punched in a series of commands into the console, grunting with what popped up on the display.

"The core of the Array overloaded. Look at this power spike, it must have blown itself."

"Sir? Why would it do that? The last maintenance cycle was just two weeks ago, and it passed with flying colors."

Shara and Nicholas shared an uneasy glance, and for once it was the Captain that answered before the Guardian.

"Someone sabotaged it, probably a virus."

The tech looked confused at that, and then his eyes widened slightly. Nicholas nodded.

"Exactly. We don't dare bring up any of the others until we figure out what happened to this one. Shara, send an alert to all the other bases, and let's see about finding out what sort of sabotage took place. Get me all the sensor data that we've ever pulled from Array Ten."

Katya was submerged up to her nose in a fetid pool of water, listening the men who were searching the area. It was pure dumb luck that she wasn't dead right now. They had left the ranch only an hour after the Major had returned. Katya had checked, and then packed, all her equipment into the large metal case that she took everywhere she went. It had taken them four hours of searching to find the canyon that the major, a squat bulldog of a man, had learned about from the aborigines that he spoke to. It was obvious though; once they had reached the canyon that they had found what they were looking for. The large metallic structure rising a hundred foot off the ground, with an odd crystal hanging from the top of it had been a rather large clue, as had been the buildings and activity around the base of it.

Katya had guessed that there were nearly three dozen people down there, from her position lying down at the top of the canyon. She could make out individual faces through her spotting scope, as well as the German made weapons that they all carried, mostly MP5s. Good equipment, and expensive.

The Major had taken one look through her scope, and shimmied his way backwards away from the edge, before standing up.

"That's it. Let's get back and radio in what we found."

He had been halfway to the truck when he said that, and they had been his last words. Katya, had half turned to look at the Major, when the sun suddenly was blocked out. She distinctly remembered turning back, and staring at the large black delta winged ship that had silently risen up in front of her. It was impossible. Nothing should be hovering like that so silently, but it was. The second after that thought had crossed her mind, the cannon mounted on the belly of the craft had fired.

Turning the truck into a fireball, killing Micha instantly, since he had been in the drivers seat. The Major had been beheaded, a piece of flying shrapnel simply decapitating him where he stood. Katya herself had been lucky, she had been lying on her stomach, and had avoided the blast. She prided herself on knowing when to run and when to fight, so when the silent hovering ship had turned away, she had gotten up, taken her case, and ran like hell.

The half hour since then had been spent trying to avoid the men who were obviously searching for her. The fun just had not stopped, and now she found herself hiding in the worst looking water she had ever seen outside of a sewer system. God was not a happy camper. A few minutes later, when the search party moved on, she just could not bring herself to wait and make certain they were gone. Instead she hauled herself out of the water and promptly threw up on the edge of the bank.

Grimly she wiped her mouth, picked up her case, and plodded back the way she had come, opposite the way the searches were headed.

Julie had done her best, getting a few hundred feet down a dirt road near the crash site, before she had to hide behind some thorny bushes. A pair of trucks, crammed with men carrying guns, had passed her, headed towards the crashed scout craft, and she could only pray that they would help Emily. Part of her was crumbling at the very thought of the wounded Guardian that she had left behind, and she forced herself not to think about what might happen to Emily.

She was going to wait for the trucks to come back, and then head out away from where they were going, but instead of that the men had begun searching the area. No one ever said the enemy had to be stupid, she thought bitterly. Getting up she had worked her way down the dirt track, staying only a few minutes ahead of the men, who had obviously picked up her track.

She hadn't realized that she was heading directly towards the base, until she had almost fallen into the canyon. Her eyes widening with terror she had backed away from the deadly familiar sight of the camp, and the communications array, and tried to run away, anywhere. Her trackers had her pinned now, though. Between the canyon and themselves, so she had headed northwards, parallel to the canyon side.

Julie was running blind by now, just trying to stay in as much cover as she could, while avoiding the men whom she could occasionally hear behind her. Her thoughts kept returning to Emily, and she felt a piece of her soul grow cold at the thought of her friend being allowed to bleed to death, while the armed men watched. If there was a God, they would help her.

Half stumbling through another open area, she had skidded to a stop. In front of her was the still burning remains of what had once been a small truck. The explosion she had heard earlier, she assumed. Her eyes constantly scanning the sky for the silent death, she moved closer and swallowed as she spotted the decapitated man lying in the dust. She was about to simply avoid the entire area, and keep moving, when her eyes fell on the small walkie-talkie stuck in the man's belt.

With a sliver of hope she snatched it up, cast a glance over her shoulder, and kept moving. To stay in one place out in the open was to be caught. To be caught was to fail Emily, and she would not do that. She would die before she did that.

A few hundred feet later she found a hiding place. Julie had been searching along the lip of the canyon, trying to see if there was some way to hide from the people searching for her, and had tried to stay to the rock lip of the canyon, to avoid leaving tracks in the dust for the men to follow. She had leaned over just far enough, at just the right moment to spot the small hollow, hidden behind a boulder, just a dozen feet down the side of the canyon wall. Scrambling down the rock face, and bruising her side, she had thrown herself into the hollow, and held her breath.

An eternity later, the men had passed above her, shouting orders back and forth as they ran. What little she caught made her grimace a smile, they thought she had continued onwards, along the canyon rim. She could only hope that they would continue to think that.

She was lay there, cut, bruised, bleeding, and clutching herself in a fetal position, for she knew not how long. When she finally got herself under control again, she slowly began to take stock of her position. She had to get a message to Kithkarn, but she had no way to do so. She had a weapon that she didn't know how to use, and a walkie talkie that she had no clue if it worked or not. It would be a few hours before nightfall, and she knew what her chances were if she tried to run in the daylight with those search parties out there. Even in the darkness, she was doubtful, if they had one of those silent shuttles. Death would come from above, and she would never see it coming.

To keep her mind off Emily, she forced her shaking hands to pick up the odd shaped pistol. It was fairly easy to figure out, the trigger was in the right place, and she was fairly certain that the bulky block under the barrel was magazine. There was a switch near the back, which was probably the safety, although she couldn't understand the writing imprinted next to it. Julie couldn't risk testing it, but she was fairly sure she could use it, if she had to.

Next was the walkie-talkie. It looked to be in one piece, and when she turned on the switch, the indicator light glowed red. So far, so good. She had, of course, no way to tell who, if anyone, would be listening, but she could try. Holding it up to her mouth, she spoke.

"Hello? Is anyone out there? This is Lieutenant Julie McGrath, United States Army, can anyone hear me?"

Letting up the transmit button, she waited, and hoped.

She nearly dropped the blasted thing when a voice, lightly accented, answered.

"Yas? Who is this?"

Katya was holed up inbetween several boulders, near the edge of the canyon. She had seen the flying delta thing silently move across where her team had died, and begin what looked an awful lot like a search pattern to her. She was not going to go running around while trying to keep track of an aircraft that could hover without making any sound, and had a cannon on its belly. That was a very good way to get ones self killed.

She had honestly forgotten that she still had her walkie-talkie strapped to her belt, when the thing started speaking to her. Katya was never accused of being a jumpy person, not in her line of work, but she had been startled when someone started speaking English out of it. Could it be a trick? A way to trace her down, and find out where she was hiding? All of her training was screaming at her to shatter the thing into a thousand pieces and forget it.

Forever after, she could never say what made her answer the voice in the walkie-talkie. It was, perhaps, because whoever it was sounded so tired, and so very lonely. Whatever it was, she answered cautiously.

"Ya, who is this?"

The voice paused, as if she had not actually thought that someone would answer her, and then returned.

"This is Lieutenant Julie McGrath, United States Army. Who is this?"

Katya nearly laughed out loud at that. US Army? Out here, now? Somewhere there was a God laughing at this entire situation, she just knew it.

"This is God."

She gave her call sign, fully expecting that those in the building were probably monitoring the channel, even though each walkie-talkie had a scrambler unit on it.

"God huh? I could really use some help from you then, I guess."

Katya grinned at the humor that this American was showing, and her opinion of her went up a bit. Taking out her scope once more, she zoomed in on a truck that had pulled in down at the camp. Watching as she spoke, she absently focused in on the proceedings.

"What troubles you my child?"

"Oh, you know, the usual. People trying to catch me and kill me."

"We have that in common at least. Some of those people are unloading someone down by their temple right now. Not one of mine though, maybe one of yours?"

There was silence for a long moment, and Katya could imagine the woman on the other end trying to get a view from wherever she was hidden at the goings on down at the base of the canyon.

"Yes, one of mine. I have to go save her."

That took Katya by surprise and she blinked at the walkie-talkie in disbelief. Unless this woman had a lot of people with her, which she doubted, she was talking about walking into a camp with dozens of armed guards everywhere. Not to mention the silent flying death thing.

"My child, I think that is unwise."

"God, I don't care. That person is my friend, and if I can't get her message out, the least I can do is free her."

The anger in the woman's voice caused Katya to frown slightly. She knew that anger, it was the anger of not being able to do something. It was something she was intimately familiar with. Ah well, what the hell, she didn't want to live forever anyway, and these people owed her for her team. She had even liked the Major, who had been pretty cute for an asshole.

"God will protect you my child."

Julie didn't know who would call herself God, but at the moment she didn't care if the woman called herself the devil, as long as she was going to help. She had promised Emily that she would get word to Kithkarn, but she hadn't a clue how she was going to do that without being spotted and killed. It was bad enough that there were teams of men searching for her, and probably God as well, but the shuttle, that was real bad news. Once night fell, she wouldn't even be able to spot it before it blew her into very small parts. So, there was only one thing to do. Get into that base, and contact Kithkarn from there, somehow. Then, if she were still alive, she would find Emily and get her out of there.

Her course decided upon, she settled back into the small hollow, and watched the activity below her. She hadn't talked to God in a few minutes, which was probably all for the better, since they probably could locate the walkie-talkies, if not listen in on what they were saying. She would wait until just before dark, when she could still spot the silent shuttle, and yet, hopefully, be able to blend in somewhat with the lengthening shadows. At least, that was the plan.

Cautiously she inched forwards, and peered down at what was happening around the communications array. Armed people were still coming and going, and Julie took a bit of comfort in the fact that none of them appeared to have been armed with Tiri weapons. Hopefully that meant Emily had been correct in her guess that whoever it was hadn't been able to divert many weapons to this little project. Which meant she might just live long enough to get that message out, as long as she could avoid that shuttle that was.

Timing, she decided, would be critical, and she settled in to watch the movements below her, and keep an eye out for the shuttle. If there were a pattern, she would find it.

Imperial Prince Weston Windstar the Third, Heir to the Imperial throne, prince of Igelsland, was in a piss poor mood as he stepped out of the shuttle into hanger number two, at Kithkarn. First he had been called to Washington to do what he could to assure the Americans that they weren't about to be invaded. Thankfully, Major Sims had done a lot to help him there, and he had hopes that they might even manage to pull it off. If they did, it would make what they had managed at Roswell look like a parlor trick in comparison.

The Emperor was even going to get to meet with the American President for the first time since the Tiri had arrived on Earth, and a meeting had been set up to take place in two days time.

I should have known things weren't going to be that easy, he thought irritated as he waited for his Marine guards to descend into the hanger deck ahead of him. Just when things had settled down a bit in Washington, he had gotten the urgent report from Nicholas regarding his sister, and the destruction of one of the orbital sensor platforms. That was going to be hard enough to explain, by itself. It had blown up nearly directly over the Chinese, and Nicholas was going insane trying to keep them from learning what really had happened. The Russians, for once, had been ominously quiet, and Weston hoped that Darrien, the Guardian in charge of northern Asia and eastern Europe, was on the ball up there.

Nicholas met him at the base of the shuttle's access stairs, and did away with the usual ceremonial greetings.

"We have a problem."

Weston battled the urge to sigh in despair at that. The only time he had ever heard of Nicholas saying that there was an actual problem, had been when the Plague had been discovered back on Tiri Prime.

"What sort of problem?"

Nicholas was already leading them across the large hanger, towards a guarded access hatch. The added security was quite obvious, and Weston nodded in silent approval. They didn't know who the traitor, or traitors, were. All of the Tiri bases had been put on high security alert for the duration of the crisis. Nicholas didn't answer his question until they were inside of a nearby meeting room, and the Marines were stationed outside to keep people out.

"The Virus, its not just in the Orbital Sensor Arrays. We've found traces of it in all of the Sensor Platforms that make up the Sensor Sphere."

Weston felt his gut clench at that. If someone had managed to get a computer virus into the operating systems of those unmanned platforms, they could take over the entire sensor sphere.

They would be able to shut it down, and allow earth based radio signals to escape, or, even worse, make the sphere start transmitting. It would light up the entire solar system, like hanging a big neon sign with the words "here we are" over the sun. The Bak'ra wouldn't have any trouble spotting them on long-range sensors, and all it took was one scout ship to find them, and it was over.

"Can we purge the systems?"

"We're looking at it now, but it's an incredibly adaptive virus. Our best guess is that if we try to do a scan of the area where Emie went down, it will cause the sensor array to overload its core. It might be programmed to do the same thing with the Sensor Sphere stations."

Weston's mouth tightened at that. They couldn't afford either of those scenarios.

"How long until you know?"

"We've got tech crews scrambling from Mars and Luna base at the moment, but it's going to be a few hours before we know anything."

The heir to the throne sat back in his chair, and scrubbed at his face with the heels of his hands.

"All right, what about Emie? Any sign of her yet?"

"None. We sent up a second scout ship, but it got shot down by what sounded to be one of our shuttles retro fitted with a plasma cannon."

Weston's eyes narrowed at that little bit of knowledge. So, now they were certain, it had to be someone high up in the Tiri command structure to be able to steal a shuttle.

"I'm guessing that's what they used to hijack the intrasystem transport. Fine, get me a ready response team. We'll do a ground search if we have to, but we will find whatever it is that this traitor is doing. I still can't figure out why he is using a communications array on earth though. Surely it would be easier for him to build it in space?"

Nicholas had no answer to that question, and he simply bowed, before leaving to put the ready response team on five minute alert. Leaving the Heir alone with his thoughts.

Emily slipped in and out of consciousness after Julie left. The auto injectors from the med kit had done their job, and she could only feel a dull ache in her shattered leg. The bleeding had almost stopped as well, as the coagulants got to work. At least, she hoped the bleeding had almost stopped; she was in no shape to try and put another bandage on the wound.

She knew that the ones who had shot them down would not be long in coming, and she was not disappointed. Time was skewed, but it seemed that between one burst of consciousness and the

next, the crash site was swarming with armed men. They had yelled questions to her, in first some Baltic language, and then a heavily accented English. Even if she had understood them, she wouldn't have said a thing.

The next thing she knew, she had been loaded, not too gently, on a stretcher and place in one of the trucks. The majority of the men stayed to search the area, and Emily spared a prayer to the Maker for her friend. Then they were moving, the old army truck bouncing over the rutted dirt track, and she had to grit her teeth to avoid screaming in pain at every bone jarring bump that they went over. The painkillers were still working, but she doubted anything would have stopped the pain that the infinite ride back to their base caused.

She must have blacked out again, because when she came to, she had been moved inside one of the crude prefabricated buildings set up around the communications array, and someone was looking at her leg. Whoever it was didn't have the skill that the Maker had given a warthog, and he forced her bone back into place with audible grinding and with no injections to make the muscles relax. She grit her teeth, the muscles in her neck bulging, until she felt one of her molars crack. Darkness soon followed.

This time, when she woke up, the pain felt a bit better, not gone, by any stretch of the imagination, but a bit lessened. The first thing she did, now that she could think beyond the blinding white pain, was mentally reaching for her link with her ship self. If she could focus enough, she could transmit a message about what had happened. All that Emily was able to do, though, was touch on a swirling mass of confusion, where her link should have been. Frowning, she opened her eyes, and discovered that she was not alone in the dirty little hut that they had brought her to.

A man, wearing Imperial unpowered armor, stood nearby, watching her with a smirk.

"So you're a mighty Guardian. Don't look too tough to me."

He paused to hack up a wad of mucus and spit on the floor, before halfheartedly wiping his mouth.

"Boss said he wanted ta see ya. So I gonna bring ya ta see him. No funny business, got me? Or I just gonna give ya another one a these."

He held up a small vial in one hand, and Emily managed to focus enough to barely read the label. Cynaomarist, a drug that had been stumbled upon by Tiri scientists two centuries earlier, which had the effect of blocking a Guardian's link to her ship self. It was only used in the very rare case that a Guardian was considered to be a threat to herself and others. That explains why I can't use my link, she thought, as her strength left her, and her head fell back against the top of the stretcher. With the amount of drugs still in her system, it had been a miracle she could still focus. She had noticed the tray of medical equipment nearby though.

"Ya be good now."

The man smelled as bad as he looked, which was quite a statement. She couldn't place the heavy accent, but considering her mental state at the moment, that was not surprising. The second he turned around to set aside the vial, she reached out and, with the last of her strength, palmed a blood-covered scalpel from the nearby tray. When he turned around, she had only just managed to hide it in the sleeve of her uniform.

She had been transferred to a stretcher with wheels, and the man began pushing her towards a corridor that linked this prefab structure with the others.

"Boss really wanna meet you."

Julie waited until the shadows were as long as they were going to get, and the sun was just barely above the horizon, before moving. She had timed it as best as she could, and she half scrambled, half slid down the steep canyon wall when there was a lull in the activity below her. She could only pray that no one spotted her, and that God was out there, watching over her as she had promised.

She reached the bottom of the canyon, and threw herself into the dry riverbed that meandered through it. No shouts, no shots, or sirens, followed, and she let herself take a trembling breath to try and calm herself. A group of ten men had just came back in from searching, and another group of ten had left at the same time to take up the search. No others should be coming back for a while now, and she only had to worry about the guards. While she had been waiting for dusk, Julie had tried her very best to time the routes that each of the pairs of guards took. As long as they stuck to it, she would have a one minute window in five minutes, in which she would have to sprint from where she was to the seldom used prefab structure ahead of her. It was the building through which she had seen the least movement, and she could only hope that the small shack like building was empty.

She timed it exactly, five minutes to the second, and she was up and sprinting across the dusty ground, avoiding the occasional small bush, in her hundred foot dash across open ground to the prefabricated shack, which was connected to the others by what looked to be a system of corridors.

Julie would have made it, if it hadn't been for the soldier watching from the second floor window of the largest prefab building. She hadn't seen him when she had been watching the guards, but he had absolutely no problem spotting her, and he smiled as he raised the sniper rifle to his shoulder and took aim. It was a nearly point blank shot for the decent quality sniper rifle that he had, and he took his time waiting for her to get halfway to her destination, sighting in on her chest. Too hard to hit her in the head when she was running, but a chest shot would do just as well. The Russian made Dragunov sniper rifle was over forty years old, but it was still accurate enough for what he wanted.

Placing the crosshairs on her chest, he put his finger into the trigger guard, and grinned. The Boss was going to give him a bonus for this one, he was positive. His finger tightened on the trigger.

Julie was halfway from the safety of the dry riverbed to the dubious safety of the building ahead of her, when the air was split with a dull "Crack".

She didn't stop, even though her instinct was to toss herself to the ground, but crossed to the small shack as quickly as she could, and hurled herself through the door. Landing in a very undignified sprawl on the floor of the storage shed, that was full of miscellaneous equipment, left over from the building of the communications array. Quickly she barred the door, locking it from the inside with the deadbolt that was part of the doorframe. Only then did she pick up her walkie-talkie.

"God?"

"This is God, all is well, American?"

"I think so. What happened?"

"I was watching out for you."

Julie could hear what sounded like yelling outside, and that was shortly afterwards followed by four rapid "Cracks" in a row, the yelling disappeared.

From the spot she had selected near the entry to the canyon, Katya smiled humorlessly. She had tracked the young American all the way down, and had seen the movement in one of the two-story buildings windows. She saw it, because that is where she would have been if she had been a sniper on duty. The scope she had was an order of magnitude better than the one that the sniper with the Dragunov had, and she had been able to see his finger begin to tense on the trigger, just before her own rifle barked, and his head exploded. That was followed by the expected stream of idiots who were stepping outside with guns drawn to see what was happening, and who was shooting. She let four step outside, before putting a bullet through each of their chests. The armor piercing rounds that she used cut right through the light Kevlar vests that most of them were wearing. No more were stupid enough to step outside, and she imagined that they were yelling for that silent flying ship to come back and blow her away. Which was why she was up and moving to her second spot a second after her fifth shot had been fired. She was one of the best Russian Army snipers in the world, and she had been very well trained.

Back in the storage hut, Julie pulled her side arm and carefully made her way through the piled equipment, towards the corridor entrance. If she lived through this, she would thank whoever God was, but for now she was just very thankful that God was diverting attention from her.

Clicking off what, she hoped, was the safety; Julie held the side arm as she had been taught to do with her pistol. Two handed, and held low while she worked her way over to the open corridor. There were more shots outside, coming from a different direction, and she hoped that God would

be able to fend for herself for a while. She had to find a way to transmit a message to Kithkarn, which was going to be a bit difficult, as she had no clue how to even use their communications equipment. All she could hope was that she would be able to use her Gift to send the message.

The corridor, as it could be charitably called, was actually two walls of stacked cinder blocks, with a roof over it, leading from one building to another. For a moment, Julie couldn't even imagine why someone would go to all the trouble of building such a thing, until she realized it would shield movement between buildings from observation. She needed an active computer to link with.

Letting out a breath, Julie tightened her grip and began edging down the corridor. Her palms were sweating, and her breath seemed to sound as if it were echoing down the endless gray corridor. What little light there was, came from bare light bulbs strung along the roof. It was definitely not high technology, at least not the buildings. Ahead of her was a T in the corridor, and she very slowly edged her way along the rough unfinished wall. Taking a peek around the corner, she quickly took a look at what was both ways. To her right, the corridor continued on towards a bend in the corridor. To her left was a non-descript doorway, into one of the prefab structures, she hadn't a clue which one, and they all looked the same. Two more distant "Cracks" were heard, but this time Julie heard return fire.

She didn't have much to lose, so she ducked around the corner, and headed for the doorway. Just as she was reaching out with her left hand to push the door, it opened from inside. A man, carrying what looked to be a semiautomatic shotgun, stood in the doorway. The two of them stared at each other in surprise; both of them were momentarily stunned. Julie could see the surprise in the young man's eyes, even as he started to bring up his shotgun. She was so close that she could see her reflection in the pair of glasses that he wore, as she brought up her own weapon, pointed it at his chest, and pulled the trigger.

The Tiri-built Mark III dart pistol had been the standard side arm for Imperial forces for more than a century. It was a simple concept, one that humans were already starting to attempt to use in the form of rail guns. The gun had a very powerful capacitor, which powered a series of hundreds of electro magnets in the short barrel of the pistol. The small ceramic darts which the gun fired, were accelerated out of the gun to near sonic speeds. The Mark V rifle was basically a powered up version of the pistol, with two drum magazines, one for explosive-tipped, and the other for armor-piercing darts, along with being able to accelerate the darts to supersonic speeds as they left the muzzle.

Julie's side arm, although she didn't know it at the time, was loaded with explosive-tipped darts. The dart exited the muzzle of the gun at just under the speed of sound, and slammed into the chest of the man standing less than two feet in front of the muzzle. The tip of the dart was filled with a small amount of explosive, which was activated as it left the side arm. The result of which was that the man's chest exploded outward, flinging him backwards into the room behind him, and covering Julie in blood.

She stood there, shocked. Even in Ecuador, where they had walked into a small war zone, she had never killed someone that close up before. She had seen her own reflection in the man's

glasses. Julie stood there for she didn't know how long, until the sound of more rifle fire outside, drew her attention to the room where the body was now laying.

It seemed to be a small control room, with a bank of computers along one wall, and a bank of flickering florescent lights hanging from the ceiling. Trying to ignore the smell of blood, and the twitching foot, which she had to lift out of the way to close the door, Julie did her best to lock the door behind her. Unclipping the walkie-talkie from her belt, she talked as she moved over to the computer banks, and started to tug off her gloves.

"God, are you there?"

It took a long few moments for the God to respond, and she sounded winded when she did.

"This is God."

"Are you alright?"

"Just great. Are you good?"

"I'm about to start. Can you hold out for a while longer?"

At her fifth spot, Katya, winced and pressed on the wound along her side where a lucky shot had hit her. She was down to one clip, and had only a dozen rounds left. Glancing down to the Canyon below her, she saw four more soldiers trying to get to one of the trucks and leave. The shuttle had already done one pass, and Katya had only been a few seconds out of her last shooting spot, when the silently hovering delta winged craft had risen above the horizon and turned the boulders where she had been hiding, to rubble.

"I am good. You do what you have to yes? God will be waiting."

There was another burst of rifle fire, and Julie set aside the walkie-talkie, tossing aside her gloves. Time was running out. Doing her best to clear her mind, she laid her hands on the console in front of her.

It was difficult, without Emily to show her what to do, and she kept trying to force her mind. After a minute achieving nothing but a headache, she took a deep breath and did her best to relax, like Emily had said. It was hard, with the adrenaline coursing through her system, but she managed it.

Ever so carefully Julie closed her eyes, and began sorting out the information flowing through the console before her. Much of it she didn't understand, and there seemed to be a lot of information being transmitted through satellites for some reason. Sending her consciousness deeper into the computer network, she searched for what she needed, a way to contact Kithkarn. It seemed as if it took forever, but in reality, it probably only took a few seconds for her to find the computer access to the communications array. There were some sort of safe guards set up all around it, but she ducked through those easily. Once inside, she set herself to work.

Chapter Ten

Her thoughts were disjointed, scattered, as the wheeled gurney rattled down the corridors. The bare light bulbs above her flared across her vision, blurring her vision even further. The cocktail of drugs in her body made it hard to focus on anything, and even when she did, her mind tended to wander. Emily drew comfort in one thing though; the cold sticky reality of the scalpel in her left sleeve. She focused her thoughts on that. On what she was going to do with it once she met this traitor, where she was going to drive the tip home.

The lights above her went past slowly, and the wheels rattled as the putrid man behind her muttered a curse under his breath. She managed to lift her head enough to see the door in front of them, and watch the man move around the side of the gurney and open the door, pulling the gurney in after him. The door shut on it halfway through, and she winced at the jar.

The man cursed even more, and Emily lost a few minutes contemplating driving the scalpel through his neck. When she realized she was drifting, Emily focused, bringing herself back to the present, and realized they had stopped. The man was saying something, but she just couldn't get herself to focus on the buzzing sound that was his voice. Raising her head, she wearily looked at where they were now.

The man had wheeled her into what might have charitably been called a command room. Various computer consoles were scattered around the room, along with a holo-tank in the center, which was currently showing all of the Sensor Sphere. Standing next to it, was a man whom she recognized. A man whom she had fought beside, and had called a brother-in-arms on more than one occasion.

"Lirik, you scum sucking bastard."

The other Guardian, in charge of the asteroid belt, stepped forward, grinning and waving the foul smelling man out.

"Why Emily, how nice to see that you could make it to our little party. I hope you appreciate all the trouble that I've gone through to lure you here."

Her vision blurred, and when she was able to focus on him again, the other Guardian had moved over to another console and was punching in commands.

"That's impossible."

He grinned at that, bringing up the view outside of the building on the holo-tank.

"Is it? I've been a step ahead of you all the way First Guardian."

His tone was derisive, and he sneered at her title. Moving around the tank he began looking for the sniper that was beginning to become annoying.

"You think it was a coincidence that the Sergeant Major's shuttle blew up right over my decoy communications array? That he had that report with him? Then, why do you think I have the arrays on Earth? Much easier to build them in space."

She was having more and more problems focusing on him, and her mouth was going dry. Something was wrong, and she struggled to try and find out what it was. It took her only a moment to figure out what was happening. Even through her dulled link, she could feel the virus starting to spread through her ship self.

"Virus-..."

The bald Guardian smiled at that, and finished punching in his commands.

"Oh, you've met my pet? She's a nasty one I will give her that. See, Emily, you're going to be my ticket out of this piss poor excuse for a Solar System."

Even through the Cynaomarist, she could feel the virus beginning to replicate and work its way through the computer network on her ship self. If she hadn't been blocked, she would easily have been able to cleanse her system, but as it was, she was helpless. One by one, she could dimly feel systems and subsystems become infected.

"You'll never escape, Lirik. Even if you get out of here, no Guardian ship can lift out of Luna without the Emperor's orders. Your power core's locked down."

Emily's words sounded disjointed, even to her, as she desperately tried to fight her way through the drug induced block, and help her overwhelmed computer battle against the virus that Lirik had introduced. It was like trying to keep track of a conversation while a disease ate away at her brain.

"Oh please. I've had sixty-six years to plan this; you don't think I wouldn't have figured a way around that? Ah, there is your sniper friend. Shuttle, get your heads out of your asses, and blow up the rock formation at these coordinates. The sniper is hiding in that. After you have blown the sniper away, get back here, we're leaving."

Shutting off the communications panel, he spun back towards her, grinning even wider as he noticed the sweat rolling off the First Guardian's brow.

"I should have been First Guardian. I've been a Guardian twice as long as you have, and anybody could have gotten us to work as a unit. Honor, Wisdom, Strength! What hogwash! We should be ruling this planet, but instead we're lurking in the shadows, waiting until our beloved Emperor gives us the order. The Bak'ra, now that is a force to be impressed with. Think about how pleased they will be with someone who hands them the last of the Tiri Empire on a silver platter."

Drawing closer he grinned down at the pale blue eyes that were staring up at him with hatred.

"What's a matter Guardian? Problems speaking? I imagine that must be quite painful, to have the virus take over your ship self and you unable to do anything. I'll share a secret with you, since I like you so very much."

Running a hand over his bald head, he crouched down, just out of lunging reach from her, and whispered conspiratorially.

"See. That virus, its in every one of the Sensor Sphere Stations. When I send the signal, every station is going to light up, and start transmitting the location of this pitiful little planet, with your signature all over it. That should keep the idiots confused long enough for me to get to my ship self. Which, will be powered up, since your ship self will be having a small weapons problem. Wouldn't want a Guardian to blow up and take all ten other Guardian ship selves which are on Luna, would they?"

He smiled, almost calmly down at her, as he stood. The look in his eyes though, those she would always remember, as she battered at the mental walls the drugs had caused. Insanity, a burning desire for even more power than a Guardian already held, that was what she saw in his black eyes as he stood.

"I'll be leaving you shortly, First Guardian. Please do say hello to your brother when he shows up. He, and the ready response troops, should get here just in time for the nuclear warhead underneath this base to go up."

With a laugh that had nothing to do with humor, he turned and moved back towards the communications console.

"Hector, get back in here, and make certain I'm not disturbed. We'll be leaving shortly, after I send this signal. Tell your men to get back here."

The putrid smell returned, and Emily didn't have to look, to see that the man, who had brought her here on the wheeled dolly, was back. Lirik must have noticed her look of disgust, because he nodded, almost sympathetically as he began punching in commands.

"Human mercenaries, what do you want? Barbarians never did learn how to keep themselves clean I guess."

She didn't have the strength to respond, but she did glare at him. The drugs were still there, but she imagined she could feel the block growing a bit thinner. Forcing herself, she threw everything she had at it.

"My my, what do we have here? Seems someone's tripped my access guardians."

Emily almost didn't hear him, and it was only the frown in his voice that caused her to waste some of her precious energy to take a look towards the other Guardian. He was standing next to the communications console, eyes closed, and frowning.

"Why Emily, you brought another Guardian with you. No, not another Guardian, just a gifted human, I would have recognized her if she was a Guardian. She's trying to access the communications array. How quaint. Lets show her how its done, shall we?"

Julie, she's in the base. The thought rang through her, freezing her thoughts as she pictured the young woman alone in the base. Emily had no clue who the sniper was, but she hoped that the sniper was helping Julie out somehow. At least the sniper seemed to have drawn attention away from the base, probably letting Julie sneak inside. All of which passed through her mind in a split second. Desperately, she renewed her attacks on the block, trying to force a contact with her ship self through.

What she had taken as guard programs around the communications array access, had turned out to be decoys. Julie had slipped past the opening between the guards with ease, only to find out that it was some sort of trap. She had been fully immersed; farther than she had ever been during her time with Majestic. Her consciousness had been nearly totally separated from her body, and then the trap had folded around her. It felt like lines of burning light wrapping around her mind, and holding her in place. The light, it burned, and she shrank into herself, trying to cringe away from the light. Which did nothing but let the light bands wrap even tighter around her. It was then that she started to panic, feeling the bands burn into her, and lashed out.

She struck out at the bands, trying to force them out and away from them. For a moment Julie feared she wasn't strong enough, and then the bands snapped, shattered actually, and she was free again.

A bit more cautiously, she moved forward, sliding through the systems towards the command access for the communications array. After the last encounter, she was careful of the area around the entrance. So it was that Julie wasn't that surprised when she sensed another presence ahead of her, blocking the way.

This one wasn't a program though; it felt different, not artificial. A split second later she realized why, when she felt the brush of intellect against hers. It definitely wasn't Emily, it felt different, and she was certain of that when she felt the other presence lash out at her.

Frantically she back peddled, feeling the fringe of the lash burn across her thoughts. The other presence, Lirik she pulled his name from his thoughts in that moment of contact was trying to destroy her thoughts. Julie had no idea what would happen to her body if her consciousness was destroyed in here, but she had no intention of finding out.

Back tracking, she made her way past where the trap had been set for her, and winced as the other Guardian circled around her. He was faster than her, and he knew this system intimately. He was faster and knew more than she did, and she realized, immediately that she had only one chance.

Something that Major Sims had once told her, a long time ago. The greatest swordsman in the world does not fear the second best, or even the third. He fears the novice, the one who does not know what the proper response to a move is.

So, Julie did the only thing she could think of. When he tried to crush her connection to her body again, she threw her entire being at him.

The drug block was still holding, but she did her best, throwing herself again and again at it. It was weakening, slowly, but it was weakening. Not fast enough though, the Virus had taken over nearly every subsystem, and was now eating its way through the lock out protocols around her weapon systems. If it managed to access that, she had no doubt that Lirik would be able to do exactly as he had threatened.

Each Guardian's ship self was a massive ship of the line. Each one meant to function as the core of its own battle group, such as this world's current Air Craft Carriers. It was upon the Guardian that each of the smaller ships depended on for transport through a warp gate. It had only been during the Bak'ra invasion though, that the tactics for several Guardians to work together had evolved, along with the full concept of a Guardian battle group. Unfortunately, only three of the support ships had survived the plague, the crews of the others having perished.

The three light frigates, along with the ten Guardian ship selves who were stationed on Earth, were held at Luna base. It was impossible to get a five-kilometer long Guardian ship to descend through the atmosphere unnoticed, and even dangerous. None of the Guardian ships were even designed to land on a planet, and it had been more than a bit harrowing to land them on the dark side of the moon. After a minor mishap in 1969, where Thiere, the African Guardian, had by mistake powered up both of her fusion power plants, all of the fusion plants had been locked down by order of the Emperor. Only physical removal of the lock down mechanisms would allow the plants to power up.

If the virus detonated her ship self, besides ripping her mind to shreds, it would destroy at the least all of Luna base, along with any of the other ten Guardian ships who were near her. The virus wouldn't have to power up her fusion plants to accomplish that, if it managed to override the safeties on her missile stores, she could detonate them inside of the missile vaults. The Emperor would have no choice but to order the lock downs removed, and get the Guardians out of there. Which was what Lirik wanted of course.

Hector was still near her, she could smell his putrid stink, and she did her best to ignore it along with the dull pain in her leg. Once again she took comfort in the solid reality of the scalpel, pressing her wrist down along its length to feel its now warm metal surface.

If only Lirik would get a bit closer, she would do her best to use the scalpel.

Emily's thoughts of driving the scalpel through Lirik's right eye were side tracked, when the Guardian in question screamed. Opening her eyes, she watched in amazement as Lirik arched his

back, his body going rigid, and the scream went on and on. With desperation, he hauled himself away from the console, staggering. Emily could see blood seeping from his ears, and nose, and he looked about with terror. The look of madness faded, but the pain obviously did not. Cringing he clasped his ears, mewling in pain and fell to his knees.

Hector took an uncertain step towards the kneeling Guardian, but stopped as Lirik held up a hand.

"Just, give me a minute. Bitch nearly killed me."

Silently Emily cheered for her young friend. She had no clue what Julie had done to him, but whatever it was, she had injured him. Closing her eyes she set back to work on the block with renewed vigor, distantly hearing Lirik's next words.

"She got a message out. Get your men together Hector we're leaving as soon as that shuttle lands."

Weston was strapped into the combat drop ship in his powered armor, as were the twenty-four other members of the Imperial Rapid Response Team. Besides him, grimly checking his own suit's particle projection cannon, Sergeant Major Torsson looked ready to kill something. Weston didn't particularly blame the man, who had somehow managed to get a spot onboard this particular mission. Weston had just raised an eyebrow, and the Sergeant Major, looking slightly sheepish, had responded that the Lady Windstar had pulled him out of Northern Quebec, so he figured he owed her. After that, Weston hadn't been too surprised to see that the pilot of the sixty-meter long drop ship was Ile, the pilot that had gone down with the Sergeant Major.

Since leaving Kithkarn, a half hour ago, the two drop ships and four fighters, had been holding position, just under the surface of the water, a kilometer off the shore of Australia. Weston had simply overridden Nicholas's advice that he not go with the troops. His sister was in trouble, and he was going to be damned if he didn't help her out. The fact that he was riding along with the pinnacle of the Imperial Marines seemed to help Nicholas accept his decision a bit easier. Each of the two-meter tall powered armor suits had enough firepower to wage its own little private war, and enough armor to shrug aside even explosive darts.

He was just about to ask for another communications check with Kithkarn, when the communications officer leaned forwards in her chair at the front of the drop ship. The drop ship's six person crew were the only ones not in power armor, and even they were wearing unpowered fleet armor. It sacrificed some of the protection, which Marine unpowered armor offered, in favor of more maneuverability. The woman frowned as she listened intensely to whatever transmission had just came in, and then changed channels, speaking to Weston's powered armor.

"Sir, Kithkarn just picked up a transmission from inside the area that Lady Windstar was searching. It was high powered, and came from a large communications array. There was no message, just the array lighting up."

Weston felt his lips pull back into a smile, and could sense the marines listening carefully.

"Get us there now. Full combat drop."

Like angels of vengeance, the six crafts broke the surface of the ocean, and headed inland. None of them were the least concerned with staying out of sight now, and a nearby cargo ship spotted them. A man on deck tossing aside his bottle and finding God once more. The four sleek and deadly shapes of the fighters, ringed protectively around the two lumbering drop ships, broke the sound barrier just as they crossed the shore.

Julie wasn't sure which of them was more surprised, herself or the other Guardian. With more strength than she had thought she had, she lunged her entire being at the other presence, and tried to strangle it. It had obviously been a tactic that the other one had not expected, and she had hurt it. Julie had done her best to hold on to Lirik, but he had slipped away. But not before she managed to trace him.

As quickly as she could, she activated the communications array. Figuring that the Tiri would be able to trace it back as long as she just left it transmitting, she slid back out through the computer network and thankfully back into her body. Where she promptly collapsed, as the world spun in front of her eyes. She felt drained, almost more than ever before, and it was a struggle for her to slowly stand.

Making certain to pick up the side arm, which felt like it weighed a ton, Julie slowly set out down the corridor towards where she had traced the other Guardian, and where she hoped to find Emily.

God was the first to admit she was in trouble. She was doing her best, but that damn silent craft had driven her back from the edge of the canyon, and Katya had just run out of hiding spots. There was only empty ground around her, and outcropping of rock that she was currently taking shelter behind. There were three bullets left in her magazine, and she put one of them through the face of an enemy soldier who had been trying to climb up out of the canyon and get at her. They were stupid, but they kept on coming.

Two bullets now, and she would be out. She had no illusions about the rock outcropping saving her from one of the shots from that flying craft. The last place she had hid behind, a huge boulder, and been turned to rubble by just one shot from the cannon mounted on the underbelly of the thing. Her father had always told her that there was no future in sniping, but had she believed him? No, of course not, that would have been too close to actually listening to his advice.

Night was almost fully descended now, and she feared that more than she thought was possible. The black craft would be able to sneak up on her, and she had no doubts about how long she would last then. Better to see it coming, than to die alone, huddled against the rock.

She waited, patiently, as ever, for the now dreaded sight to come from the north on another pass. Stepping slightly to the side, she raised the rifle to her shoulder in an action as automatic as breathing. The weight was comforting in her hands, and she looked through the scope at the rapidly approaching craft. It was, actually, quite elegant. Katya's mind absently noted the graceful delta wing shape, and the dark skin of the craft. Even as she thought that, she lined up the crosshairs on what she assumed was the cockpit window.

The red glass didn't let her see if anyone was inside, but she estimated where a pilot would normally sit. Automatically she adjusted for the slight westerly wind, and the drop of the bullet for that distance. Taking in a breath, she slowly let it out, timing between one heartbeat and another. As always, she wasn't aware that she was going to fire, until the rifle bucked in her hands.

It took a moment for the bullet to travel the distance between her and the coming craft. It didn't surprise her much when all she saw through the scope was the flash of sparks as the bullet hit the window and didn't do any damage that she could see. With deadly calm, Katya switched her aim to the cannon on the belly of the thing, and again carefully aimed. The shot met with the same success, and she tossed the rifle aside with a sense of detachment.

She had tried her best.

The craft, again she marveled at how silent it was when it hovered, came to a hover over the canyon in front of her, a hundred meters or so off the ground she was on, its nose tilted slightly down towards her. The cannon moved, tracking her, she supposed. When it didn't fire immediately she gritted her teeth. They wanted her to run, or beg. She would not give them the satisfaction. Crossing her arms over her chest she took a step forward and leveled her best glare at the thing. In her native Russian, Katya yelled at it.

"Come on you ball-less wonders. Do it!"

They seemed to understand that, and she watched the mouth of the cannon light up. Bracing herself, she whispered a silent prayer to her father, asking for his forgiveness.

Which was when a bolt of what could have been lightning leapt from the sky in back of her, and smashed into the center of the craft. The shuttle turned into a fireball, its wings and nose exploding off of it. The force of the explosion sent Katya sprawling.

She lay there a bit stunned, the ringing sound in her ears not immediately lessening. Bits of flaming debris were crashing to the ground all around her, and she pitied the soldiers who had been inside of the canyon itself. The craft hadn't been over where the prefabricated buildings were, and she hoped the American was still alive.

It was in the near darkness that she realized that there were things falling out of the sky. Man shaped, huge, things. They reminded her of golems, almost anyway, and they were landing all around where she was. One of the nearly ten foot tall metal monstrosities landed only a dozen feet away, with a dull thud. Without a parachute, she noted belatedly.

The thing was vaguely humanoid in shape, two legs, and two arms. Although the right one seemed to end in a wicked looking gatling gun of sorts, and in the left it carried what appeared to be a shield. Mounted over its right shoulder was what looked like a six-foot long rifle to her. A pack fell off its back, smoking slightly, and the scent of ozone carried on the wind. The thing turned, with a very quiet whirring of servos, and Katya watched in fascination as it stepped towards her. Two more steps and it had come within a few feet of her. With silent amazement she looked up at it in the near darkness, the flaming debris around her lending a bit of surreal quality to the thing in front of her.

What appeared to be the front section of the thing, slid out and then swung upwards, revealing a human inside. The man hopped down out of the suit, and knelt next to her, speaking into a small microphone as he did.

"Need a medic here."

He quickly did a search of her, as Katya continued to stare at him.

"Are you injured?"

He was speaking English, she noted dimly, and shook her head.

"No, I'm fine."

Another of the large suits stepped closer, a white star painted on its arm. Its front swung up as well, and a man hopped down out of it. He pulled a pack from inside the thing and began working on one of the larger cuts that Katya absently noted she had received. The first man was speaking again, and she did her best to focus in on his words, while still watching the other large metallic suits moving towards the edge of the canyon.

"We're here to help. I'm looking for two of our people. Have you seen them?"

Two of the Marines had dropped at the crash site, and had found the remains of the pilot and the copilot. That meant that his sister and Ms. McGrath were probably still alive. Somewhere out here.

"Da, an American, she went in after her friend."

That seemed to be the answer the man had been hoping for. He grinned to her, and stood, talking again into the microphone as he strapped himself back into the metallic suit.

"Lady Windstar and Ms. McGrath are inside the buildings. Make certain you know who you're shooting at. Lets go."

Lirik screamed in rage at the screen, while Emily laughed, which came out sounding like a cough. The male Guardian was watching the holo-tank, which had just shown him his ride out of the compound going up in an explosion as an Imperial Fighter put a plasma bolt through it.

"NO! NO!!!!"

The virus had spread through nearly all her systems, and was on the verge of taking over her weapon systems as well. Hopefully, it wouldn't matter in a short while, now that she was almost positive that Imperial jump troops would be on the ground shortly, if they weren't already.

Lirik, she was positive, had just snapped. He was ranting at the holo-tank, yelling at it, screaming at it, as if it were somehow responsible for everything that had just happened. Hector had stepped backwards, next to the head of her gurney, and was looking a bit fearful at the moment. Emily didn't blame him; he and Lirik weren't in a very good position at the moment. The Tiri Empire had a very dim view of traitors, for whom the last death penalty in Tiri law still stood.

With one last yell, Lirik whirled and pulled his dart pistol, aiming it at both her and Hector. She wasn't sure which, and it was probable that Lirik himself didn't even know.

"You. This is all your fault. I'm going to make sure you don't leave here!"

Emily tensed, gathering what energy she had, ready to at least get down off the stupid gurney, as Hector tensed, slowly reaching for his pistol, but a noise at the entrance drew all of their attention, even Lirik's.

The woman, who leaned against the doorway, bracing herself upright, and pointing her dart pistol at Lirik, didn't look much like the woman that Emily had flown out here with. Her front was covered in blood, which it took Emily a frantic second to realize was not her own, her uniform was torn and covered in mud and dust. Her red hair was matted with sweat and gore. To Emily, Julie had never looked as beautiful as she did at that moment though.

"I don't know who you are, but if you don't stop pointing that gun at my partner, I'm going to blow your brains out."

Lirik blinked in surprise, and he lowered his side arm slowly, as if not sure what to do. Julie offered Emily a weak smile, and tried to keep herself from sliding down the side of the doorway.

"Hey, Emie, you ok?"

"Just peachy, you?"

"Same old."

Emily grinned tiredly at her friend, and for the first time since they had been shot down, started to think that she might just live through this. Lirik, on the other hand, seemed to find the entire scene hilarious. Laughing, he waved the side arm around, causing all three of the others in the room to tense.

"You! You're the other gifted one! A human barbarian ruined my plans."

The last seemed to set him off again, and he nearly doubled over laughing.

Hector chose that moment to act. Pulling the pistol from its holster, he started to bring it up and around to point at Julie. He was just a foot away from Emily when he did it, and she used the last of her carefully gathered energy in lunging at him, stabbing with the scalpel.

Time seemed to slow, as it has want to do on occasion. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lirik straightening, and raising his dart pistol at Julie. She could only yell a warning, and hope the young American understood. Emily's stab had been aimed at Hector's face, but the gurney moved as she lunged, and the tip of the bloody scalpel went in a bit lower. Both of them tumbled to the floor, Emily's weight driving the scalpel through the side of Hector's neck, and going through most of the major arteries and veins, along with his windpipe.

Behind her she heard the soft thwhipping sound of a dart pistol firing, and rolled over just in time to see Lirik, with an astonished expression on his face, clutch where his abdomen used to be, and crumple to the floor. Julie slumped down the doorframe a second later, and the two of them stared at each other. Both of them were now covered in blood, and neither of them had enough energy to even crawl.

"You look like hell."

Emily couldn't resist saying it, and a moment later the two of them were laughing. Howling with laughter, and if shock had more than a little bit to do with it, they didn't notice.

Weston and the Marines found them there, holding their stomachs and laughing. Emily managed to get a hold of her self to stare up at the astonished face of her brother, and grinned.

"You're late."

Surrounding the Solar System at what humans measured as 80 Astronomical Units away was the Oort cloud. This loose cloud of ice and rock bodies, located 80 times the distance of the earth from the sun, was the source of many of the comets, which passed through the system.

Hidden among the thousands of random sized debris, which formed a huge sphere around the solar system, a thirty-meter long craft powered up. Its generator was a small one, the largest one

that Lirik could steal without being noticed. It didn't have to be that powerful for what it was designed to do. Once it was fully powered, the generator burned itself out, generating just enough power for the built in communications array to send a pulse racing out of the system.

Chapter Eleven

"You do realize that this is an informal dinner, right?"

Emily was lounging on the bed in Julie's guest quarters while Julie herself was doing her best to try and make certain that her dress uniform was perfect. The last week had been a hectic one, and she had only just gotten her hands on a dress uniform that was her size. Adjusting the top of her uniform, she eyed herself critically in the mirror.

"That's why you're in your dress uniform, right? You're certain that you feel all ok?"

She could almost see the Guardian roll her eyes in the other room.

"Yes. I'm fine. Passed all my tests with flying colors. I'm in my dress uniform because it's expected of me, not you."

Doing her best to get her hair under control, Julie smiled at the annoyance in her friend's voice. For a while there she had been afraid that she would never get to hear Emily's voice, or see her again.

By the time the drop ship had touched down and picked them up, the entire complex had been searched and taken over by the Marine jump troops. The medics hadn't been able to completely neutralize the drugs in Emily's system, so they had been taken directly to Luna base. They had been able to neutralize enough of it so that Emily could start on fighting the virus. Once at Luna, the massive complex's hospital had easily been able to neutralize the drug.

Julie still remembered her first sight of the base. The drop ship had not been the most comfortable thing to ride in, and the unpowered armor, which apparently doubled as space suits, which they had stuffed her in, was a size too large. Still, she had stayed in the main hold, where the powered armor was normally held, and waited by Emily's side. The medics, after finding out she was Gifted, had given her fluids and what she was fairly certain were sugars, and she felt a lot better. They had done a bit more work on Emily's wounded leg, but the majority would have to wait until after she had dealt with the virus in her ship self.

Finally, bundling them each up in unpowered armor, Weston had summoned one of the drop ships, loaded them on, and sent them off to Luna base. Julie had taken Emily's hand, as her friend had fought to cleanse her systems of the virus now that the drug induced block was gone, and watched out one of the small view ports as they made the two hour trip.

Not counting the sub orbital flight to Australia, which she had been out for most of anyway, this was her first trip into space. They had boosted on the craft's antigravity engines for nearly a kilometer, before its engines had come up. Unlike the shuttle, the drop ship was old Tiri tech, the same as the scout ship, and only had its plasma engines. The large rear compartment of the craft had hydraulic doors under each station where a powered armor suit would stand. They would open when the drop ship was over its target, literally dropping off the troops, who wore a small one shot antigravity generator on the back of the suit.

Once in orbit, the craft had angled towards the moon, and Julie had gasped as she saw the Earth, for the first time from space. It was beautiful, swirling clouds of white, over the blue of oceans, and the darker colors of the landmasses. It was a picture that would forever be etched into her mind, and she had looked down to see pale blue eyes looking up at her in understanding.

"That's what we need to protect."

Emily had managed to clear most of her systems by the time they had reached Luna, which was located on the dark side of the moon. The base, which had been the first to be established, Julie found out, was among the largest the Tiri had built so far. Julie had been almost afraid to ask how they had managed to hide the base from the various probes, which had been launched from earth to study the dark side of the moon over the years. She was fairly certain that she wouldn't like the answers too much.

Luna Base, or Luna as they all seemed to call it, turned out to be huge. The spider web like base was built into a huge series of impact craters. They had buried as much of the base under moon dust as they could, but the landing pads were above surface. Ten Guardian ships were buried under a thin layer of dust, each of them over five kilometers in length. More than anything else, the fact that this had been there for a bit more than sixty years drove home the enormity of the secret that the Tiri had been trying to hide.

Trying, and succeeding, right up until a week ago. Which was when two-drop ships, and four fighters of non-Earth design, had gone straight over a TV crew doing a nature documentary on the Outback. That and the exploding sensor platform in high orbit had been a bit much for even the Tiri to manage to keep under wraps.

"How long do we have?"

"A half hour."

Poking her head out the door, Julie grinned at her relaxed friend. Emily was stretched out on her bed, hands behind her head, staring up at the ceiling above her. Dressed in what Emily had assured her was a Guardian's dress uniform. The gray uniform looked a lot like the black one, except for the ceremonial sword at her side.

"Comfy?"

She was rewarded by a grin and a nod.

"Oh yes. While my father and everyone else is going insane, I'm going to enjoy the quiet for as long as I can."

"How bad is it?"

Coming out from the bathroom, Julie perched on the edge of the bed.

"Oh, we've been preparing for this for sixty years now, but we thought we'd have at least another forty or so to work with. It could be worse, but the diplomatic corps is going insane trying to keep track of everything."

"Things are going to get crazy soon then?"

"Oh yes. The second they realize what the Bak'ra are going to do to Earth once they get here, yup. It's amazing what a common enemy can do to bring old adversaries together. That's when I'll be busy. Do you have any idea what it's going to be like merging so many different military structures?"

Groaning, Emily picked up a pillow and put it over her face, while Julie grinned.

"Maybe you should just kill me now."

At that, the grin faded and Julie looked away. She kept picturing Emily, lying in the dust, her leg bleeding, as Julie left her behind.

"No dying."

There was silence for a moment, and then Julie felt Emily shift and long arms wrapped around her, pulling her into a hug she gratefully accepted, surprised by the sudden tears that blurred her vision.

"Hey. It's all right. We're safe, no dying."

Julie nodded, and held on tighter, realizing she was acting silly but not caring at the moment. They hadn't talked about the attack yet; there hadn't been much of a chance to.

"Don't ever ask me to leave you behind like that again."

The words were muffled by the shoulder that Julie had her face pressed up against, and she felt Emily's arms tighten around her at that.

"You had to go, they would have captured both of us then, and what good would that have been?"

Julie could feel Emily's words resonate in her chest as she spoke them, and she closed her eyes, sinking deeper into the hug and relaxing. This was where she belonged, this was home. They

stayed like that for a few moments, and then Julie reluctantly drew back a bit so that she could see Emily's face.

"We're going to have to have a talk, you and I, soon."

Emily nodded, her blue eyes darker than Julie could ever remember seeing them before. Her breath caught as Emily's eyelids half-closed, and her lips parted slightly. *Oh God, she's going to kiss me, oh God.* The thought kept repeating over and over in her mind, as she tilted her head upwards. She could feel the warmth of their bodies pressed together, even through the stiff fabric of their dress uniforms. Their breaths mingled and she leaned forward even more, needing to taste Emily's lips.

Which was when the door chimed.

With a groan, Emily pulled back and Julie got up off her lap. She was going to kill someone if that happened again; there was no way around it. Her hands were shaking, and she could feel warmth coiling between her legs. At least she had the satisfaction of seeing Emily unsteadily straighten her uniform as she moved towards the doorway.

Somehow, she wasn't surprised to see Weston standing outside, in his own sort of uniform. The dark Armani suit fit him well, and he looked just as tired as she had thought he would be. He had been on the front lines of the sudden unveiling of the Tiri.

"I hope I'm interrupting something. If you ladies are ready, we're expected for dinner?"

Julie grinned as Emily turned towards her and bowed.

"Lady McGrath, would you do me the honor of allowing me to escort you to dinner?"

Trying not to laugh, Julie returned the bow with a mock curtsy.

"Why Lady Windstar, I would be delighted."

Taking Emily's offered arm, Julie followed the black haired woman out the doors, and down the corridor. The Marine Honor Guard fell into step behind them, along with Weston's guards. The corridors were surprisingly large and well lit. Emily had explained it to her, when she had asked, that all of the bases had been built with the understanding that most Tiri would not be able to leave them for decades. Which meant that a lot of effort had gone into building the bases large, and comfortable.

"I trust that my sister has been resting?"

Julie grinned and answered before Emily could.

"Yes, she has. How are things on Earth?"

"It's still there, that's about all I can say for right now. It could still go either way."

All of them were silent as they stepped into the lift. Things were still on the razor's edge on Earth. The Tiri had contacts and as many agents spread through every level of each major government as they could manage, but there were only so many Tiri, even with all the recruiting they had done over the decades. Emily was the first to break the quiet.

"Where is our Russian sniper friend?"

To Julie amazement, Weston actually seemed uncomfortable with that question.

"She's going to meet us there. Katya was drooling over the toys that the Marines were showing her. She seems to really have liked the single pulse particle accelerator rifles."

"Gee, wonder why she would like those?"

Julie nudged her tall friend in the side at that.

"Be nice, she helped me get to you."

"Yeah, yeah. We'll just give the Red Star operative a more powerful weapon for her to snipe with."

Red Star was a name that Julie, and Majestic itself, was familiar with. They were the Russian counterparts to Majestic, and more than once the two had encountered one another out in the field. None of the teams had ever shot at each other, but that didn't mean that the two were even faintly civil to each other. The cold war might have ended for the rest of the world, but as far as Majestic and Red Star were concerned, it was still going strong. Julie could understand the need for both to keep their activities under the strictest secrecy, but more than once she had wondered if they might not have been able to accomplish a lot more if they had actually shared a bit of information about what each had found. Not that we managed to find too much, she reflected with a grin. A few bits of material from Roswell, some from that crash down in the Yucatan, and that was about it. Just enough to keep both agencies guessing, and hunting for those who had produced the amazing alloy.

Looking up she realized that she was smiling to herself, and that both Emie and Weston were looking at her with nearly identical looks of curiosity.

"You know, I just thought of something. Why are you speaking English?"

The two looks of curiosity remained.

"I mean, aren't you supposed to speak Tiri or something like that?"

Emily and Weston both shared a look at her question, and Emily answered.

"When we came here, we built ten bases around the world, which you know."

Julie nodded, watching the level indicator pass 28.

"So, each base was a security risk, not to mention all the field personnel. It was decided that all communications on Earth would be done in native languages. Every base personnel learned the language of the country that their base was located in."

Julie blinked at that, and then frowned.

"Are you telling me that all of your base personnel know at least two languages?"

Weston nodded, with a grin this time.

"Some know three or four, depending how many bases they have served at."

Just the thought that every Tiri soldier knew at least two languages was just a bit overwhelming. The lift came to a stop and the three of them followed the four Marine Honor Guards out, Julie muttering as she went, in her best Bruce Willis imitation.

"I only know two languages, English, and bad English."

Which wasn't quite true, since she did well enough with Spanish, but still, that meant that the common Tiri grunt knew at least as many languages as she did!

Dinner was a fantastic affair; among the most enjoyable that Emily could ever remember having. In deference to Katya and Julie, they had spoken English through-out the meal, since Katya seemed to have an easier time speaking English than Julie had speaking Russian.

Emily's father, to her relief, had seemed to like Julie, and had genuinely enjoyed the stories that both Julie and Katya had told. Her brother, to Emily's growing suspicion, had listened intently to every word that Katya had said. It seemed that her brother was becoming a big fan of the brunette, and she was positive of it when he kept offering to refill her glass.

Dinner was held in one of the formal dining rooms deep inside of one of Luna base's residential domes. The Royal Guard had cordoned off the entire level, and, as always, they were being very picky about who came and went. The small dining room would have been considered sub standard during pre-evacuation days. It was nice though, and Emily personally liked it better. The ten meter long rectangular room had been lined with wood, polished to a shine. A small chandelier, which Emily was positive she didn't want to know where it had come from, had been hung over the table. Dalton, the Windstar chef for as long as Emily could remember, had outdone himself as far as she was concerned. It was Earth food; of course, since nearly all Tiri supplies had been used up during the years, but the duck was among the best she had ever eaten.

Judging by the grin on Julie's face, and how quickly her young friend had worked through it, it was among the best she had ever had as well.

Now, they had all finished eating and were enjoying the light fruity alcoholic drink that was a standard after dinner drink for the Tiri. While Julie finished off her chocolate mousse pie, and Weston was listening intently to a story that Katya was telling, Emily took a moment to study her father.

Lord Weston Windstar The Second had been Emperor for over two and a half centuries. She could remember her father as a vital figure, always working and holding the Empire together. Ever since the evacuation though, he had aged. His once shock black hair was now silver, and there was a tiredness in his blue eyes, a shade darker than her own. Even now he looked tired, and she worried about him. He was over three hundred years old now, and the long struggle against the Bak'ra, had wore heavily upon him.

He caught her look, and smiled gently in answer. With a bit of the old mischief in his eyes, he nodded towards Julie and raised his glass of grinsts, with a smile. Groaning, she turned just in time to see Julie hide a grin by taking a sip of her own wine. Perfect, now she had to worry about keeping Julie away from her father.

"Something wrong, Guardian?"

Emily eyed the red-head with a bit of wariness.

"What exactly were the two of you talking about when I was busy humiliating Weston with early childhood stories?"

Julie grinned and finished her last bite of pie.

"You should have been paying attention, Guardian."

"Listen to her, Emie, she's quite wise, and I like her."

Emily groaned as her father used her nickname, he's doing this on purpose. It was, apparently, the chance that Julie was waiting for, and she leaned forward.

"Why does everyone keep calling her Emie?"

Emily glared at her father, trying to get him to not answer that particular question. In typical fashion, he ignored the glare and smiled innocently in answer to the question.

"Its quite a story, Ms. McGrath."

"Please, Your Highness, call me Julie."

He grinned at that, and leaned back in his chair, taking a sip of the sweet wine as he thought back, while Emily sighed and gave in to the inevitable, and poured herself more wine. Even Weston and the sniper were listening now, and Emily resigned herself to losing a bit of her dignity.

"When she was young, we kept calling her Emily, and she wasn't quite able to say her name, so it sounded more like Em. That's not where it comes from though. There was this time, on her sixth birthday..."

Emily couldn't help the groan that followed that, and was about to open her mouth to protest, when Julie shushed her. That got a wicked grin from Weston, and she resisted the urge to punch her dear brother.

"She had this big birthday party, and all her family was there. We had a huge, well, it was basically a cake like you have here. Emily was supposed to wait for after the dinner, but she apparently really wanted some cake. So, she slipped out of the celebration, and by the time anyone had found out, she had eaten half of the cake."

Emily could feel her cheeks grow hot, and she glared at Weston as he snickered. Staring down into her wine glass she muttered,

"It was really good cake."

"Anyway, we had this minor security crisis, since her Honor Guard had lost track of her as well. We all burst into the kitchen, and there was Emily, sitting on top of the table, eating cake with her hands. It was a mess, and I think that poor Dalton nearly had a stroke at the sight of his hard work being messed up like that."

Julie was already grinning, and Katya was chuckling. Weston had already heard the story many times before, and had been there when it happened, but even he was grinning. Emily put her hands over her face, and tried not to listen as Father finished the rest of the story.

"You have to picture this, a few dozen Honor Guards burst in thinking that the Lady Windstar had been abducted somehow along with all of her relatives, and Dalton, and servants. She looked up, her face and dress all covered in cake, and looked at us with this shocked innocent look. We all stared at her in shock, and she said the first thing that must have come to mind: "Emie did it."

Julie was laughing so hard that her eyes were tearing, Katya and Weston were laughing as well, and Emily sank a bit lower in her chair, as her father grinned to her and took a sip of wine.

"It was really good cake."

The laughter was cut short, when a Fleet Major hurried inside, looking pale.

"Sire, a long range scanning platform, located in the Ascirani system just detected a Bak'ra fleet."

Chapter Twelve

Nearly six hundred light years from Earth, in a Binary star system that Tiri astronomers had labeled the Ascirani System, a long range-scanning outpost came to life. It was nearly a hundred years old, as time was counted on Earth, but it had been designed with an operational lifespan of over five hundred years. Its linked fusion generators provided more than enough power, and all of its critical systems had backups for their backups. The onboard primitive AI computer noted without feeling the sudden gravitational and energy flux as multiple Warp Gates formed at the edge of the system. It watched, recording, as ships began to slide through those Warp Gates. Its logical mind waited patiently for the identity of those ships to be positive, before it activated its massive communications array and began transmitting.

It took the ships, over a hundred of them, nearly twelve hours to travel deep enough into the system to reach the outpost, which had faithfully transmitted every detail it observed of the coming Bak'ra ships. No answer had been received to its transmissions by the time the first of the Bak'ra ships closed within tractor range of the kilometer wide sensor outpost. Its programmers had foreseen such a possibility, and the AI waited patiently as the ships crept closer, scanning its surface as it continued to transmit. When the first of the hulking vessels latched onto it with a tractor beam in preparation for boarding, the AI initiated its last program. Its massive fusion power plant spun up to emergency power, and then detonated. For a brief fiery second, the Ascirani System had a third sun. The twelve nearest ships were ripped apart by the explosion, and another six damaged. The Bak'ra noted that this was the definite proof that the burst transmission had been correct. The Tiri were in this sector of the galaxy. Scouts were dispatched, and a message was sent back to the Bak'ra home fleet.

"Statistically speaking, over half of you will not pass this program and go on to become Guardians."

Julie listened carefully to the man dressed in the dark blue uniform of the Imperial Navy, who was addressing them. Major Castigar was a bulldog of a man, and was one of the most senior Imperial Marines to have survived the Evacuation. He was now in charge of the hastily put together training program for Guardian candidates, which was being held in what used to be an Air Force Base in northern America. Even from inside the auditorium, Julie could hear the army of workmen who were working on the former Plattsburgh Air Force Base, in northern New York. She and her three hundred fellow trainees, who had been rounded up from around the world, had only arrived at the PAFB a day, and in some cases, minutes before the lecture had begun.

The Major motioned towards one of the other seven people who were standing at perfect attention at the front of the lecture hall, and Julie recognized the white-haired Sergeant Major who stepped forward.

"Sergeant Major Torsson will be directly in charge of your physical training during this program. You will be expected to be proficient with all Imperial standard weaponry and equipment by the

end. This program will last for nine months. During the first three, you will remain on the base. Afterwards, there will be a break of five days. From there, the next three month section, you will be allowed a day off after every six days. The last three months will be spent training in space, Luna and Mars. If you make it that far, you will then spend another twelve months in extensive training for what you will require to know as a Guardian."

Julie heard the groan from nearby, and had to grin at the various faces of dismay around her. Only a few in the room had ever had any sort of military training, and she could only pick out two others in the room at the moment that wore military uniforms. Those didn't seem to find anything odd about the training schedule. Julie could easily remember her own training, and sincerely doubted that anything that they were going to go through would be as bad as basic training, at least, she hoped it wouldn't. She really didn't want to go through hell week again.

Her attention was pulled back to the front, as the Sergeant Major took over speaking. In the dark green uniform of an Imperial Marine, and perfectly pressed and shined, he was a formidable looking man indeed. The people in the room varied in age from a minimum of sixteen, to a cut off of sixty. Emily had said that there was another program being set up for those below the age of sixteen who manifested any signs of the Gift. Emily had also mentioned that she didn't hold much hope for those over thirty five or so in finishing the program, but they needed every Guardian they could get, so she would screen everyone she could find. The Sergeant Major kept his face perfectly neutral as he looked at those spread out in the auditorium, as he spoke.

"Over the past four months, you have doubtlessly heard about the Bak'ra, and that they are coming. You have also, doubtlessly heard that we are in short supply for Guardians. Twenty-one Guardians survived the Evacuation from Tiri Prime. One of those, as you should know, died four months ago, meaning that only Twenty Guardians are left to defend the Earth. That does not mean that I will hesitate in cutting you from the program if I feel you are not able to keep up. You each have until twelve hundred to stow your things and report to your Sergeants. Dismissed."

PAFB was divided into two sections. The old base, which had been around during the time that the base had been an Army barracks during World War II, and the new base, which was built during the cold war as a part of the Strategic Bomber Command. The long runway, an alternate landing site for the space shuttle, had been the home for F-111 fighters, B-52 bombers, and KC-105 tankers. The two halves of the base were separated by a route 11, one of the major county roads, and Julie gladly hopped into one of the waiting vans outside of the auditorium for the trip back to the old base. She, and three others, had been assigned to one of the grand old red-bricked buildings, which surrounded what was known as The Oval. A road, which formed a circle, in the middle of which was a large open field. She was depressingly certain that she knew where they would be assembling every morning.

On the short ride back to the gate onto the new base, and then across to the old base, she stared out the window, her thoughts on the four months that had nearly flown past. Around her there were some halfhearted attempts at conversation, but most of the assembled Gifted people had only arrived a short time ago, and they were feeling the effects of jet lag. Or maybe, Julie thought with a small smile, we better start calling that Shuttle lag, since Imperial shuttles, with

Marine guards, had arrived to transport every Gifted person that the Tiri had encountered on Earth over the years.

She wondered what Emily was doing; it had been nearly a month now since she had seen the Guardian. Every Guardian had been busy as the Tiri's plans were all activated. Earth had five years, give or take a year, before the Bak'ra scouts would reach the Solar System. The sensor sphere would protect them from notice until then, but not from a scout ship entering the system itself. No one knew why the Bak'ra had suddenly started searching this sector of the Galaxy, but there were plenty of theories. Lirik, the Traitor, was prominently featured in most of them, although Emily had confided in her that she feared that Lirik had not acted alone.

Shortly after the message had been picked up from the Ascirani System outpost, each of the ten Guardian ships, which had been based on Luna, lifted off. The nine living Guardians had escorted the lifeless hulk that had once been Lirik's ship self deeper into the system, after stripping it of everything useful. The hulk was pushed "down" the gravity well into the sun, incinerating long before it reached the surface. Julie had stood with Emily on the command deck of her ship self, amazed at the sheer size of a Guardian ship.

Each of them was a touch over five kilometers-- the Tiri had switched to measuring everything in the metric system and Julie was well on the way to following them-- and had two fusion generators. The UN, and most of the nations on Earth were still trying to figure out what they were going to do, but the Tiri had begun moving. They had not spent sixty-six years preparing for this day for nothing. Most of their efforts had gone into preparing an infrastructure to handle the massive build up which would be required to defend the system from the Bak'ra.

Now, four months later, things were starting to sort out. Most of the United Nations had put themselves behind the Tiri after detailed explanations and videos had been given to each country and broadcast in a brilliant move of propaganda of what the Bak'ra would do if they captured Earth. Despite the summer weather, Julie shivered slightly as she remembered learning what the Bak'ra did to those planets they captured. Bak'ra, it turned out, meant Meat Eater in Tiri. To the Bak'ra, other races were to be considered food sources, and were used as such. The worst was that the Bak'ra, sometime in their past, had started out as humans also. Probably seeded by these Ancients, as the Tiri called them. With all the genetic modifications they had done to themselves, Julie wouldn't ever mistake a Bak'ra for a human though.

Then had come the Regeneration centers, fully operational at every one of the ten Tiri bases, which had each begun above ground expansions the minute they could. Regeneration was given to those who were past adolescence, and halted the aging process, or at least, slowed it down a lot. With the support that the Tiri were able to get from that, the governments of most of the nations had no choice but to ally themselves with the Tiri. The Emperor was doing his best to push through charters which would be the first step towards a true world government, but that had a ways to go. Not everything was a glowing success though. The traditional trouble spots were still trouble spots, and no one had the manpower at the moment to do anything about them.

That, at least, was going to change soon enough. The Tiri had taken every abandoned cold war military base they could get their hands on and were transforming them into training facilities.

The Imperial Navy, Marines, and Air Force had each begun training every regenerated able-bodied person they could get. Guardian Command was doing its level best, as the overall military command, to provide teachers, but there just weren't that many Tiri. As it was, the growth curve was going to be steep.

With a start she realized the van was pulling up outside of the three-story elegant red brick house that was her stop. With a grin to the Indian man next to her, she climbed out and headed up the wooden steps, holding open the door for her three housemates. Thank God they weren't going to be housed in barracks; she had enough of that when she was a Private.

The first to come up the steps was Mary Eilsen. The sixteen-year-old girl, whom Julie wasn't entirely certain had actually turned sixteen, came from Portland, Maine. The younger girl had hair of a multitude of different colors, and was a self-proclaimed Hacker. She had spent most of last night trying to explain the difference between a Hacker and a Cracker to Julie, who had just smiled and nodded as she listened, not truly understanding most of the terms that Mary had used. The girl had been very good at what she had been doing.

Next was Harry Cranston, the slightly famous NASCAR driver. The twenty-year-old black man had only just started driving two seasons ago, but had quickly made a name for himself in the predominantly white driver race division. The man was silent, but was as self-assured as they came, and he nodded his thanks to Julie before heading inside. His instincts as to how far he could push his car were near legend.

Following a few steps behind was Marcus Felps. The fifty five year old man was nearly to the cut off point for the program, but was clearly as determined as any to do what he could. He was an aeronautical engineer, and had been famous for being able to tweak airframes of fighters to the limit. He dipped his silver head in thanks to Julie and smiled as he passed her.

Each of them had the Gift, to varying degrees, and had been marked for quite a while by the Tiri, and had an eye kept on them. Following them inside, she was headed towards the stairs up to her room when Harry called to her from the kitchen.

"Hey! Julie, you got a present waiting for you back here."

"A what?"

Frowning she changed her course, and headed for the kitchen. Mary and Marcus were already there, and all three of her housemates were watching her with curiosity as she entered. There, already on the large wooden table, was a vase with a dozen red roses in it, and a card hanging off the side. Julie blinked in astonishment at the sight.

"Well? Who's it from?"

For a person who called herself an introvert, Mary was pretty interested in what was going on around her, and Julie shook her head with amusement as she picked up the envelope with her

name written on it. Opening the flap, she smiled as she saw the signature below the simple message.

Good luck, you'll do great. Don't plan anything for your first break; I'll try to take you out to celebrate.

Emily

Realizing she was smiling like a fool, she looked up to find three identical looks of amused curiosity directed towards her. With a shake of her head, she stuffed the envelope in her pocket and grinned in answer.

"It's from a good friend. I'm going to go get squared away."

She was nearly to the stairs when she heard Mary's not so quiet whisper.

"I wish I had friends like that."

"How bad is it?"

"Well, we should have the ship yards up and running in a week or so, but the Orbital Defense Station construction is behind schedule."

Emily scowled at the display port in front of her and shook her head. She and Darrien were on the command deck of her ship self. Before them, hanging against the backdrop of the red planet, Mars, was the slowly assembling pieces of what would shortly be the first of a series of orbital shipyards. With a glance towards where Angwar was busily trying to explain the duties of a Provost to a group of recruits, she turned back to the hulking Guardian and shook her head.

"We need those stations up and running. We don't have any leeway in the schedule, Darrien. Are you certain that we can't do better?"

"Emily, listen to me. Lorin knows what she is doing, and she simply doesn't have enough manpower. That and the production facilities at Luna aren't done. We thought we would have another few decades."

"How are we doing in the asteroid belt?"

Darrien handed her the pad that he had brought over with him, and she scanned the report with a bit of satisfaction.

"At least that's on schedule. How soon until we hit the thousand ton a day mark?"

"We should be up to that in a few weeks, as long as we get the manpower of course."

Emily gave him a bit of a grin at that and offered back the pad, which the large Guardian took back from her with a smile. Things were going to be close, but they had a shot. Thank the Maker that the Bak'ra were so methodical. They were systematically working across the sector, sending scout ships to every system. Which gave Earth five years, give or take a few months, before the first scout ship arrived. Now if they could only be ready by then, they might even stand a chance. Glancing over towards Darrien, she narrowed her eyes as she spotted the look on her old friend's face.

"Yes?"

"Well, I was just wondering, what's this I hear about you and a Gifted human?"

Emily sighed at that and headed for her rest room, just off of the command deck. Darrien was only a step or two behind her, and she made her way through the sliding hatch to where she had a good bottle of wine left. Uncorking it, she poured two glasses, and offered one to Darrien before taking a seat behind her desk. The large male Guardian took a seat across from her, grimacing as he took a sip of the red wine.

"After sixty years, I find that I have a preference for Vodka."

She laughed at that, shaking her head.

"That stuff will kill you, you know that right?"

He levered a beefy finger at her and shook his head.

"Oh no you don't. I've known you far too long for you to even try that on me, Emie. What's this about a Gifted human? Your brother mentioned a name last I spoke with him, Julie McGrath is it?"

Weston, I'll get you for this.

"She's part of the American Majestic, cousin to the Red Star people who kept giving you fits in Russia. She's at the training camp at PAFB now, with the others."

Darrien kept watching her with a knowing grin on that craggy face of his and she threw up her hands.

"Alright, fine. I sent her a dozen roses, for her first day of training. I hope they got there all right."

A smile crossed Darrien's face and he saluted her with his glass of wine.

"Good! Excellent news! The others will be happy to know that Weston was telling the truth."

At her groan, he chuckled.

"You know how impossible it is to keep a secret between Guardians, I don't even know why you're trying."

Emily hoped that Julie wasn't going to hear about the tendency for gossip between Guardians for a while. It was bad enough that she was looking forward to seeing the young woman again, without her finding out how much Emily liked her from others.

"Yeah, yeah, so how are things going with Guardian construction?"

Darrien was in charge of making certain that there would be Guardian ships ready for those Guardians who made it through the training program. Since they were expecting, based on the numbers from Tiri past, around a forty percent success rate, that meant that there would have to be around a hundred and twenty Guardian ships ready in just under two years time.

"Let me tell you, Emie, these humans are stubborn people. Tell them they can't do something and all they do is work harder on it. We'll do our best, but that's a lot of hulls. Thank the Maker that we made all of the shipyards in sections out in the asteroid belt. Now we just have to put them all together and get working. The factories are up and running, although we're behind schedule at Luna as you know. It's going to be tight, I won't tell you otherwise. What worries me is getting crews for all these ships, and for the ships which are going to form the battle groups."

A Guardian, at least now, never operated alone. He or she was the center of a battle group, much as the Carrier was the center of the modern US Navy battle groups. Without those ships to support her, and her supporting them, they had no chance against the superior numbers that the Bak'ra could throw at them. A typical battle group, at least in the past, consisted of two Battleships, four heavy cruisers, and up to eight light cruisers, along with a dozen or so specialized craft such as jammer ships, and point defense ships. Along with all the fighters, nearly a hundred and twenty, that meant that each battle group, at an absolute minimum, needed seventeen thousand personnel. That was the bare minimum to be fully combat ready with a battle group. Which didn't even take into account manning all of the massive orbital defense stations.

With a hundred and forty Guardian Groups, including the twenty Tiri Guardians, that meant that they needed almost two and a half million in crew. It was a staggering number of people to train, and finding them landed squarely at the doorstep of Guardian Command, of which Emily, as First Guardian, was the head of. Larin was in charge of finding personnel for the critical building and infrastructure system, and Emily didn't envy the other woman. Still, Emily had her own problems, and was going to have to find a lot of manpower. She had a good idea of where she was going to find them, but none of the nations on Earth were going to like it.

"You do realize that the only place where I'm going to find crews is the Armed Forces of Earth."

Darrien snorted a laugh at that, and drained his glass of wine as he stood.

"Good luck stripping them of men. Most of them are on the edge as it is about all this. Don't like feeling like they are second rate, and now you want to strip them of all their manpower. Nope, they won't like that at all."

Emily stood as well, and shrugged, tugging her uniform into place nearly unconsciously.

"Doesn't much matter if they like it or not, Darrien. We need those people, and even with all the volunteers, we just don't have enough time to train everyone. Where are you off to now?"

Walking with him she escorted him back through the command deck, then down the lift and towards one of the many flight decks. The constant presence of the Marine Honor Guard nearly forgotten by both Guardians, as they following them.

"Eh, I've got to get back to the asteroid belt. We're bringing three more refineries online, and I need to be there. You're off to Earth again?"

Emily couldn't help the small smile that crossed her face at the mention of her next destination.

"Yes, I'll be taking a look at the orbital defense stations, see how far we're behind, and see if I can get Larin to free up some more manpower to work on them. Not that I hold much hope in that happening, but I need to try. Then I have to participate in the summit that the Emperor is hosting."

Darrien turned towards her and smiled.

"Now for a lighter bit of news. Did you know that the Russians made a formal request to the Emperor to use a tractor beam to keep MIR aloft?"

Emily blinked in amazement at that. The fifteen-year-old station had never particularly impressed her, although she had to admit it was impressive with what technology the humans had been using.

"Did the Emperor point out to them that a tractor beam would crush that thing like a tin can?"

Darrien nodded with a grin.

"He was a bit more diplomatic than you, First Guardian."

Emily snorted in amusement as the lift came to a stop and they headed down the corridor.

"You do realize once we have the Orbital Defense Stations up and running, we'll have to explain that we'll be putting up a planetary shield?"

Both of them shared a grimace at that. Anything in low Earth orbit, such as satellites, would shatter against the shield once it was up. There were going to be a lot of unhappy corporations and nations once they found that little fact out.

"You know, it just occurred to me, if you're going to Earth, you could pay a visit to Julie."

Stopping outside of the primary shuttle hangar, she shook her head at the grin on the other Guardian's face.

"All right, yes, maybe I'll drop by and see Julie if I can manage it. But she's in training, I won't be able to do more than say hello. Although, I should see how the set up for training is coming along. Each of the Guardians are going to be cycling through doing stints as teachers, even you my old friend."

Even the news that he would have to teach, something that Darrien abhorred, didn't wipe the smile from his craggy face. Saluting her with his clenched fist over his heart he grinned to her.

"Honor, Wisdom, and Strength. Take care, First Guardian, I'll see you next time our paths cross."

Returning his salute and traditional words, she nodded with a sigh.

"It's going to be a long few years."

"Angel Five, this is Angel One, target sighted."

Julie grinned and adjusted her course slightly. The cockpit around her was as close to form fitting as she had ever been into. The view screen ahead of her showed the darkness of space, and the occasional chunk of rock. Since the eight Tri-Wing fighters were approaching the asteroid belt, that was to be expected.

The helmet that she wore rubbed against her scalp, and she once again wished she hadn't had to cut off most of her hair. The bowl shaped haircut, with the shaved sides and back, was a necessary evil when one was using the neural impulse controls in the fighters and larger ships. The contact points were built right into the helmet, so at least she didn't have to put up with electrodes pressing against her temples.

Adjusting the small, but powerful, plasma engine, she angled towards the target that Angel Two had spotted. The eight ships were divided into two groups; the first group, Angels one through four, was to handle fighter suppression. While Angels five through eight, under Julie's command, were to take out the enemy base with the warp missiles each fighter had slung underneath them. So far, the mission was proceeding exactly according to plan, which made Julie keep her eyes peeled for trouble all the more.

They were five minutes into the asteroid field when all hell broke loose. Angel Two simply disintegrated as an explosion ripped the fragile fighter into shreds. Immediately the five remaining fighters went into evasive maneuvers, trying to climb back up and over in an inverted loop, as Julie, in Angel Five, and Ishoki, in Angel One, desperately tried to pull them out of the apparent ambush.

"Anyone see anything? What hit Angel two?"

Julie was desperately trying to scan the area, without lighting up her active scanners, as she skimmed one of the larger asteroid surfaces, her wingman staying close to her.

Harry, her wingman, came over the group's tac net, his voice as always level and calm.

"I think I caught a peek at a fighter deeper in the asteroid belt. Must have nailed him with a missile. I think we're clear.... Wait, I've got a warning light. Someone's lighting me up."

Julie's warning lights came on a second later, so she looped left, heading toward another large asteroid, Harry just a bit behind her. Over the tac net, the rest of the squad was in trouble. Bak'ra fighters were using the asteroids to close the range and negate the Tiri superiority in missiles, too close to energy weapon range. A plasma pulse cannon did nasty things when it was close enough. They had to open the range, which meant getting out of the blasted asteroid field. Bak'ra fighters were not crewed, at least not in the traditional sense as humans understood it. The Bak'ra adhered to a very rigid caste system, at least that's what the Tiri thought. Some of the Bak'ra were selected early on, and their brains were removed and linked directly to the fighters. In a close in dogfight, that gave the Bak'ra a large advantage in reaction speed, even with neural impulse control.

"Angels, open the range, get out of the asteroid belt."

Ishoki's fighter was gone, and she felt herself go cold with realization as she saw what was left of the eight-fighter force wind its way towards open space. The Bak'ra had specifically targeted Angels One through Four, the fighters that were not encumbered by the large warp missiles. The remaining four fighters would be sitting ducks in a dogfight with the heavy payload, and Julie made a snap decision.

"Angels, dump the Warp missiles, set the auto destruct and leave 'em behind."

Her sensors were showing the active power plants of a dozen fighters behind them, far more than had been expected, and she felt a bead of sweat roll down her forehead. Dumping the missiles, and making certain that they exploded to deny the Bak'ra captured technology, the four fighters streaked ahead. Tiri plasma drives were better than their Bak'ra equivalents, and Julie heaved a sigh of relief as the lighter fighters began to accelerate away from their pursuers.

Harry had managed to get ahead of her, during the last loop back, and she was just about to snap at him to get back into formation, when something on her sensors caught her eye.

"Angel Six, I've got an odd reading from ahead of us. You getting anything?"

Only a few more asteroids to go and they would be out in the clear.

"Just sensor echoes, Angel Five."

Something was wrong, those didn't look like sensor echoes to her, and she spent a moment trying to get the sensors to get a better fix on whatever it was. In those few seconds, the four remaining

fighters broke clear of the edge of the asteroid belt, and Julie's stomach clenched as she saw the looming shape ahead of them.

"Bak'ra ship! Back in the asteroid belt!"

It was far too late, and she knew it. The kilometer long ship ahead of them wasn't a ship of the line, at least not by Bak'ra standards, but it was one of their light frigates. Which they used almost exclusively for antifighter operations, and in addition to its own fighters, it carried quite a heavy array of point defenses. Which opened up a split second after Julie's desperate order, and blew the four remaining fighters away.

With a disgusted snarl, Julie pulled the helmet off her head, and waited for the top of the simulator to open. Wiping away the sweat that she felt drenched in after the last frantic minutes, she pulled herself up out of the snug cockpit as soon as the top lifted off, and scowled at the serene expression on Harry's face as he got out of his own simulator a few feet away from hers.

They were in their second month of training, and were spending nearly half of each day in the combat simulators now. Alternating between flying small attack fighters, and being in charge of the larger ships. Everything from a Guardian ship, to the small antimissile/antifighter ships, so that they knew the limits of each. The simulators were arrayed in one of the hangars near the flight line of the base. The hangar, she had been told, had once housed F-111 fighters, now it housed a couple dozen of the squat simulator tanks. Emerging from the other simulators was the rest of her ill-fated strike force, and she groaned as she hopped down onto the cement.

"Mary, this is not going to be a fun debriefing."

The young woman grinned in answer to Julie's statement and nodded. Taking their helmets with them, the eight Gifted headed outside, as another eight entered to go through the same trial.

Waving her housemates ahead of her, Julie peeled off as she spotted a familiar form, in an unfamiliar uniform, waiting for her by the van. She had to make a conscious effort to speak English, after only speaking Tiri the last few months. Besides having lie detector machines, which were at least three generations in advance of anything human kind had come up with yet, they also had actually managed to find a way to accelerate language learning with nocturnal learning. Which explained why all their personnel knew at least two languages, and didn't make her feel quite so stupid anymore.

"Why, Major Sims, this is a surprise."

Grinning, she waited until the others had loaded themselves into the van for the trip back to the classroom, before saying anything else. Her immediate superior in Majestic looked good in the dark green uniform of an Imperial Marine. The tall black man grinned in answer to her statement and waved towards a car parked nearby.

"I'll give you a lift back for your debriefing. Was in the area and thought I'd stop by and say hello."

Julie wasn't that surprised to see that the car was a non-descript Ford Taurus; seemed that old habits died hard for the Major. Strapping herself in, she waited until they had pulled away from the tarmac, and headed after the van before pointing towards his uniform.

"So? What's this all about?"

"I'm on loan to the Empire, well, at least that's what the Tiri are calling it."

He didn't seem upset at all about the loan, as he called it, so she looked at him puzzled.

"What do you mean?"

With a short bark of a laugh, the Major motioned around them.

"Julie, I know you've been stuck here for two months now, but the Tiri are taking every person they can get their hands on. The amount of manpower they need is staggering. They're stripping every Armed Force that they can get away with, and that's just for their military personnel. You should see how many people they need for those Orbital forts that they're starting to build."

Julie had heard something about personnel being loaned out, but she had been too busy, and far too tired after another day of the Sergeant Major's tender attentions to particularly care. With a shrug of sort of understanding, she leaned back in the leather chair and relaxed for the few minutes she had before her simulator run was taken apart.

"I see you're not wearing gloves anymore?"

Julie smiled and held up her hands, it almost felt natural not having the leather gloves on all the time now.

"Yup, have Emily to thank for that. Her lessons when we first met helped a lot. I'm even ahead of the others in that department at least."

The Major grinned, a bit proudly, at that.

"How are things going here?"

Julie sighed and shook her head, feeling a bit odd still about the short hair.

"We're down to two hundred or so Gifted, from a starting class of over three hundred. Most of those were the older ones who didn't make it through the first two weeks of hell. It wasn't as bad as boot camp, but it was darn close. We've been going sixteen hours a day for two months now, and I tell you, I can't wait for the first vacation.

Emily stopped by a few weeks ago, by the way. I didn't get a chance to do more than say hello to her, but she said that you were going to be heading up a project of some sort?"

The Major was nodding even before she finished the question, turning left to follow the van ahead of them as they headed towards the classrooms on the old base.

"That's part of why I'm here. I've got a meeting with Sergeant Major Torsson, see if he remembers anything else out of the ordinary about that missing intrasystem transport that started all this. Your friend Emily seems to think that Lirik might have had help."

That was not the best news she had heard all day, and she sat up a bit straighter in her seat. The smile fading from her face as she took in the Major's expression as he said that.

"What do you think?"

Pulling the car to a stop in front of the non descript cement building that was being used for teaching rooms, Sims watched as the seven Gifted ahead of them got out of the van and headed inside. They were tired, and knew that this was not going to be a good debriefing, but they were a lot more certain of themselves than they had been even two weeks ago. They were slowly learning to control and focus their gift. A lot would rest on their shoulders, and he hoped they were up for it.

"I think that we have one Shuttle too many, and it had to come from somewhere."

"What?"

Julie looked at him oddly at that, and he shook his head.

"Nothing. You better get a move on. Good luck, and say hello to Emily next time she just happens to swing by this way."

Julie shot her friend a look at that. She had grown up in a 'Don't ask, Don't tell' policy era, and the two of them had never discussed what she did on what little free time she had, or with who. Which of course meant nothing to an organization like Majestic. They probably had very complete files on every person she had ever dated.

"Take care, Major. The uniform looks good on you."

The Major watched her hurry from the car, to catch up with the other seven. Putting the car into gear a moment later, he headed out to find Sergeant Major Torsson. What he had told Julie was the truth. An inventory of Lirik's ship self had been done before it had been tossed into the sun. They had come up only one shuttle short. Which raised the question, where had the other shuttle come from? They could account for the one at the communications array in Australia, but not for the one that had been destroyed in Quebec.

If there was another traitor, it was now Major Sims' job to find out who, and to stop him or her before they caused more damage.

Chapter Thirteen

Katya had discovered that she liked Imperial power armor. A lot. The feeling of invincibility that the large suit gave a person was close to what she imagined it might feel if a person were able to strap on a tank like a second skin.

With a feral grin, she raised her right arm and powered up the L5-Dart Gatling Cannon. Toggling the magazine selector to the explosive tipped darts, she aimed downrange. With a soft whirring sound, the cannon began rotating. The heads up display gave her a clear view of what she was aiming at, even though it was dark and there was smoke. Depressing the triggering stud located at the tip of her right index finger, she watched as the cannon fired. The L5-Dart Gatling Cannon fired over a hundred and forty rounds a minute. The foot thick steel target a kilometer away was reduced to bits of shrapnel in under ten seconds.

Switching off the gatling cannon she activated her com system and spoke in Tiri.

"What next, comrades?"

The range officer, in a bunker a hundred meters behind her, came over the net. Also speaking Tiri, although with a much heavier accent, he was still feeling his way into his new uniform, so to speak.

"Comrade Captain, good shooting. Plasma gun next, followed by grenades."

Smiling she lowered the six foot long rifle which had been in the inactive straight up position over the suit's right shoulder. Taking aim down range, she activated the plasma gun, waiting the ten seconds for it to complete its power up sequence. Eleven seconds after lowering it she blew a perfect half-meter diameter hole in a piece of battle steel a kilometer and a half downrange.

God, she loved this armor.

Next came the grenades, mounted in unobtrusive tubes along the back of the armor. Each one was more of a guided missile than what she would consider a grenade. She launched all ten of them, after designating the target two kilometers away with the laser range finder. The solid concrete bunker disintegrated in a very satisfying explosion of dust and debris.

Turning around with a low whirr of servos, she raised the plasma gun to the inactive position. Sending a mental command, she waited until the front of the powered armor had unsealed and raised up before squirming her way out of it. It was a tight fit, and each one had to be custom fitted to its assigned user. Jumping lightly down to the hard packed dirt ground, she shook out her now considerably shorter spiky hair. It had either been spiky, or a bowl cut, and she preferred it like this. The back of her head had to be clear for the neural impulse sensors to sense which way she wanted to move the armor. It took a while to learn, but you got used to that.

Grinning, she headed towards the men who were emerging from the bunker. The first Multi-National Heavy Armor Battalion was being formed here, in southern Russia. A company of

which was going to be under her command. When they managed to assemble all of the troops that was. For now, they were training whoever they could get. Officially, that was the reason that Weston was here, to see the progress. Unofficially, Katya grinned, she was looking forward to dinner.

She met Weston and his six-strong Honor Guard halfway between the bunker and the starting point of the range.

"What do you think?"

"I think, God, that I should be very scared giving you such powerful weapons to use."

Weston grinned, and his eyes sparkled with mischief. Returning his grin, Katya followed him as they headed towards where the rest of the under strength battalion was being fitted with their armor.

"How is the American doing by the way? Last I heard from her she was on her way to that training center they set up."

She really did like Julie, even if she did tend to talk a lot. Once they had sorted out which Windstar they were interested in, of course. That had been an interesting conversation, and Katya grinned at the embarrassed expression on the American's face when she had asked her point blank which Windstar she liked.

Katya didn't like losing, and she wasn't going to let go of this one.

"Doing well, last I heard from Emie. How are things here?"

Katya snorted and motioned towards the troops who were slowly beginning to get used to the neural control mechanisms.

"We're forty percent under strength. Other than that, we have enough powered armor, barely."

Weston shook his head, with a grimace.

"I know, but we're strapped for manpower at the moment, and you know how long it takes to make these things. You ready to go get some food?"

Enough business for one day, she had the weekend off now, and dinner sounded perfect. All she had to do was store away the suit and she was set.

"Oh yes."

Emily relaxed, lounging in the deck chair in the humid August weather. Her four keepers were nearby, keeping an eye on the activity around her. Emily couldn't care less, she had a break, and Julie had five days off, life was good. Three months had passed since the start of Guardian training, and the recruits were getting a five-day rest. Angwar and North Star's chief medical officer, Dr. Miato, had nearly tossed her into the shuttle, with a stern warning to enjoy herself and rest. She had to admit she was feeling the strain of the last few months, and the constant headaches they had entailed.

The report from Major Sims, which she had gotten yesterday morning, had not helped. Stretching out her legs, she watched as a new group of recruits stood at attention out on The Oval in front of her, just beginning their first three months. There were only a hundred of them this time, which meant less than fifty, would pass. The report had been a detailed inventory of all Tiri equipment, which had been brought with them from the Evacuation, and made while here. The results had not been encouraging. One shuttle, one assault drop ship, six suits of power armor, two cases of dart pistols and rifles, and two cases of unpowered armor were found to be missing. The shuttle almost definitely was the one that had been destroyed in Quebec, but the rest of the equipment was unaccounted for. None of Lirik's hired soldiers had been outfitted with Tiri equipment, which was causing quite a few people some restless nights. All of the bases had been put on alert, along with the training facilities and construction sites. So far there hadn't even been any signs of sabotage, but Emily couldn't shake the feeling that there was at least one more traitor.

The slowly growing frown was banished from her face as she saw the vans enter the old base and head towards the buildings. There were fewer of those vans than there had been; a hundred and ten of the trainees had been cut from the program so far. None of Emily's housemates had been cut yet, if she remembered correctly from the last message that she had gotten.

I hope she knows what she wants to do, because I don't have a clue. How do you ask someone that you haven't even kissed yet if they would like to go find a nice hotel, and stay indoors for five days? Bad thoughts, bad Emie, she scolded herself and got a firm handle on her libido as the door to the van slid open and Julie, followed by her three housemates, stepped out. The gray uniform fit her quite nicely, Emily noticed, and she could no more stop the welcoming smile that spread across her face, than she could stop breathing.

Julie bounded up the stairs onto the porch, and the two of them stood frozen, studying each other. It wasn't until the older of the housemates; Felps was his last name Emily dimly remembered from scanning his file, stood forward and saluted.

"First Guardian."

That broke the silence and Emily returned the salute, still smiling like an idiot.

"Guardian Trainees."

The other two, a former racecar driver and a hacker, if she remembered correctly, saluted as well.

"I hope you all are going to enjoy your vacation?"

Even the stoic-faced NASCAR driver smiled slightly in answer to her question and the hacker, who looked a bit young for sixteen, was practically jumping up and down.

"Yes Ma'am, I reckon we will."

That was from the older one, who looked older than she did. It was impressive that he had lasted this long into the training. If he survived the next section, he would probably make it as a Guardian.

Julie dashed inside, grabbed an already packed duffle bag, came out and gave her surprised fellow trainees a hug each. With a grin, she looked back at Emily, mimicking the surprised expression on the Guardian's face.

"What? I packed this morning. Can we go now?"

With an amused shake of her head, Emily followed after Julie, her Honor Guard a few steps behind her. Both of them missed Mary holding out a hand and grinning victoriously.

"Told you. I win, pay up."

Grumbling, the two men forked over the bet money. The lost bet was quickly forgotten; they had five days off, and packing to do. Mary spared one last grin towards the departing two, and then followed the two men into the house. She had plans in Portland, and she was going to be damned if she was going to be late.

"So where are we going, Guardian? You were surprisingly tight lipped when I asked you last week."

Emily only grinned in answer, as she held open the door for Julie to get into the borrowed Humvee. Two of the Marines piled into the back, and the other two had their own Humvee to play with.

"It's a surprise, you wouldn't want me to ruin the surprise, would you?"

Emily caught her shrug out of the corner of her eye, as she drove across to the new base, and through the guard post after showing her identification. She headed towards the flight line, and grinned at the speculative look that was on Julie's face. After a moments thought the redhead shrugged once more and leaned back in her seat.

"I guess I'm going to have to trust you, Emie."

"Guess so."

Grinning in anticipation, Emily pulled up next to a flight-prepped shuttle.

"So this is Mars Base? Not bad at all, I must say, you people know how to build bases, Emie."

Her answer was a low laugh behind her, and Julie took a moment to just savor the feeling of being free for an entire five, well four and a half days now. They were in one of the many lifts that ran along the side of the huge dome structure that made up most of Mars Base One. Mars Base was the home of the several hundred thousand Tiri civilians who had managed to survive the evacuation. It was also the official place of residence for the Emperor, at least it had been.

"I can't believe you people decided to build a dome, underground."

Julie shook her head as she watched the sprawling city below her slowly grow closer. The hangar bays were located closer to the surface, and many large lifts operated along the side of, and center, of the dome. The several kilometers in diameter dome, made of some sort of transparent steel, enclosed an entire city as far as Julie could tell.

They had taken the shuttle back up to orbit, and docked with the North Star. Once onboard of Emily's ship self, she had warp gated, with a thousand or so Marine recruits onboard, destined for training on Mars. The recruits were still being ferried to the surface of the red planet, but Emily had pulled rank and the two of them had been on the first shuttle heading for the northern pole of the planet.

"This is quite a view, Emie."

The transparent wall of the tube made for an excellent view of the city as they descended. With a bit of a frown, she lifted a foot, and then a hand, before looking over her shoulder towards the smirking Guardian.

"Why am I getting heavier?"

"Hard to live on a planet that has forty percent the gravity that you're used to for long periods of time."

Julie narrowed her eyes at the still smirking Guardian and turned around completely.

"Oh, and how did you manage this?"

If anything, the smirk grew larger. Julie took a menacing step forward, and Emily held up both hands in surrender, laughing.

"We have a small gravitic drive under the city, same thing with Luna. It's the only way to generate a strong enough local gravity."

Julie raised an eyebrow at that, and turned back to watch the view. Shaking her head as she looked at the reflection in the transparent section ahead of her, and saw the smirk still on Emily's face.

"All right, Guardian, its impressive, I'll give you that."

It was impressive. As the Russians, and the Americans had learned, prolonged exposure to weightlessness did bad things to the body. Muscle atrophy and accelerated osteoporosis, among other things. The Tiri got around that problem with the drive systems they used in their larger vessels. Where the shuttles, fighters, and scout ships used antigravity drives, which only functioned three or so kilometers above the surface, the capital ships utilized Gravitic drive systems for normal space propulsion. Besides creating artificial gravity fields inside of the ship, the huge drive systems were used to "pull" and "push" the ship through space. Unlike the smaller craft, which had to use plasma engines, which burned a lot of fuel getting anywhere quickly, the gravitic drive system simply needed energy. Lots and lots of energy. The Tiri had even figured out how to use the same gravity bands formed by the drive system to be used as a sort of shielding against hostile attacks.

To install one under the base must have taken a lot of doing, and meant that there was nothing less than a fusion power plant under the base as well.

A warm body pressed up against her back and Julie watched as Emily lowered her head to whisper.

"Glad you approve of it. Wait until you see where we're staying."

Only the presence of the four armed Marines stopped her from doing what she wanted to do at the moment.

"You do know its bad to tease, right, Emie?"

She growled quietly in answer to the taller woman's whisper. Emie chuckled, a sound which reminded Julie of a low purr.

"Where are we staying, by the way?"

Emily shook her head, and stepped back, crossing her arms over her chest.

"That's part of the surprise. I can't ruin it for you, now can I?"

Julie spared her a dark look before once more looking out of the side of the lift. They were just a few stories above ground level now, and it took only a few seconds longer for the lift to reach what she supposed she should call the street level. There was an occasional vehicle, which she assumed would be powered by the hydrogen fuel cells that the Tiri seemed so taken with, but most of the traffic was on foot. There were trees everywhere, most of them species that Julie had

never seen before. There was at least a park every other block, and flowerboxes almost everywhere she looked.

Emily most have noticed where she was looking, because she led her past a small crowd of workers waiting to go up in the left they had come down in, and out onto the street. The four Marines deploying into two behind, and two in front of them.

"We had to design the city assuming that the civilians here would not be able to leave for at least a century. This took a quarter of a century to build, and that was just for the dome. Parts of the city are still being completed. Here, this is us."

One of the silent cars had pulled up, and the two of them got in, along with the four guards. The driver, another Marine, smiled in welcome to Emie, as he pulled away from the curb, heading towards the center of the dome. At least they didn't drive on the wrong side of the road.

"Lady Windstar, glad to see you again. Am I taking you to the Gardens?"

"Good to see you again, Tomie, and yes, we're going to the Gardens."

Julie eyed Emie expectantly for something more, but the Guardian simply slouched down a bit in her seat and grinned. Julie didn't know how, or when, but she was going to get Emily for this, somehow. Eight hours of traveling, and the stubborn Guardian had refused to tell her where they were going. And now that they were here, she wasn't saying anything about where they were going to be staying. Julie's curiosity was starting to drive her insane.

Five minutes later they were pulling up to what appeared to be a series of buildings, which had been carved from the rock at the side of the chamber. It reminded Julie of the pictures that she had seen of native American dwellings in the southern U.S. Except that these were definitely in use, and there were hundred of terraces, each covered in flowering plants and trees of all shapes and kinds. Stepping from the car and dragging her duffel along with her, she could only look up in amazement. There were twelve levels, and each one had a terrace of flowers, it almost looked like the fabled hanging gardens might have.

"These are all the plants that we managed to bring with us from Tiri Prime. A little bit of home."

Julie turned towards her friend at the sad note in her voice, but Emily just waved the remark away and forced a smile.

"Come on, we're expected, better go make certain that our rooms are ready."

Someday soon, Emie, you and I are going to talk about that pain I see in your eyes, and about the two of us. Maybe I should take a note from Lirik and drug you, seems to be the best way to get you Windstars to talk. Julie slung her duffel bag over her shoulder and followed Emie inside, grinning as she remembered the last time she had seen God. The Russian had been pissed beyond words because Weston was being, as she put it, too gentlemanly. Apparently God wanted

something other than polite talks with Lord Windstar. Taking a look at Emily's backside as they entered the rock walled hotel, Julie knew exactly how Katya felt. At least God got a kiss.

"Watch it, you idiot."

The voice hissed in annoyance at the loud thud, and the two men froze as they waited to see if they had been heard. After a minute of tense waiting, they both began sliding through the maze of pipes and conduits that lay underneath the city.

"You sure this is the way?"

"Of course I'm sure, you dimwit."

More shuffling and careful movements in the near darkness.

"Here?"

"Here."

There was the sound as if a match had been lit, and one of the men pressed the laser cutter against the base of the metal bulkhead in front of them. Forty minutes of cutting later and they were through.

"Ouch!"

"Shut up."

The first voice hissed almost instantly.

"I cut my finger."

The second voice sounded a bit put out by that.

"I don't care, just be quiet."

Muttering something about no respect, the second voice was quiet as they crawled into the shut down coolant pipe and slowly began the long trip towards their objective.

"Hey, how long until this thing's full again?"

"We got plenty of time, another hour or so before they pressurize it again. Lots of time to go down, and get back."

Both of them slid down the last forty feet of pipe, bracing themselves at the end. From there it was a twenty feet jump across to the platform that they needed to get to. Both of them made the jump easily.

"Here, hook into this console. I'll place the explosives."

Both of the packs were attached to the conduits that ran nearby, while a small computer was connected underneath the control console.

"All set?"

"Yeah, lets go."

Both of them froze as a low rumbling sound came from the coolant pipe. The second turned towards the first one and hissed.

"I thought you said we had plenty of time!"

"They must have finished the repairs early. No big deal."

"What? No big deal? How are we getting out of here?"

"Trust me, I know how to get out of here. This way... um, this way."

With a bit of uncertainty the two of them headed into the maze of corridors and conduits.

The rooms were fantastic. They were cut into the rock, and Emily had gotten them a pair of adjoining rooms. Each room had a separate bathroom, along with a small food preparation area, a living room and a bedroom with what looked to be a queen sized bed. Julie smiled as she peeked into the bathroom and saw the large whirlpool tub that was sunken into the floor. *Oh, I can't wait to use that, and the bed looks good too.* Everything paled, however, when she spotted the sliding doors, leading out of her bedroom and the garden that lay beyond.

Leaving her duffel bag where she had dropped it, the redhead stepped outside and smiled. There were three carved stone steps leading down into one of the garden terraces which she had spotted from outside. The artificial sunlight, shining from huge lights at the top of the dome, was just starting to be dimmed, and the air carried a scent that almost reminded her of honeysuckle. Sweet, but not as cloying.

Walking forward, she admired the trestles, which formed archways over the winding pathways. All of them were covered with blooming flowers, and the air was scented with flowers that she doubted any botanist could put a name to. Stopping by one particularly beautiful blooming vine, she admired the flower that almost looked like an orchid. The dark red base of the flower tapered off into a five slender purple tips.

"It's called a Kara Flower."

Julie straightened a bit and looked back towards where she had come. The garden terrace was shared by all of the rooms on this level, it seemed. Emily closed the sliding door behind her and smiled as she walked down the three steps and then down the path towards her.

"The root is used to make this horrible drink. I've been told that it's an acquired taste, but I'm not to sure about that."

"It looks nice, but it doesn't have any smell."

"It does earlier, when the flower just blooms."

The lights were dimming slowly, and it was what Julie would have called dusk on Earth, even though the light was still coming from the top of the dome. Still smiling, Emily came to a stop just in front of her.

"You're still in uniform."

Julie had meant to sound accusing, but her smile ruined the effect, and it came out sounding more like pouting. Reaching out, Emily took a hold of Julie's hand and shook her head with a sigh.

"One last bit of business before we have our vacation. I have to do a readiness tour of the city and its emergency shelters."

"Where are your four keepers?"

Julie was finding it hard to stay focused as she raised their joined hands, admiring the long slender fingers of her taller friend.

"In the room. I said I wanted to have a moment alone with you."

Swallowing, Julie raised her eyes from studying Emily's fingers, to her friend's face. They had both stepped towards each other, she dimly realized, until they were just barely touching. With fascination she watched as Emily licked her lips, tilting her face upwards, she slid her free left hand up to clasp Emily's shoulder.

"Only a moment?"

Emily murmured something in response, but Julie wasn't paying attention by then. Their lips were so close together that she could feel the Guardian's breath on her face. Only a fraction of an inch separated their lips, and her eyes closed of their own accord as both of them leaned towards one another, their lips just brushing one another's.

"Emie!"

Emily jerked backwards in surprise, and Julie nearly stumbled as her eyes flew open to spot the man coming down the steps towards them. Behind him she could see the four Marines, who didn't look too happy at the moment.

"Birk, good to see you again."

Birk, it seemed, didn't notice, or pretended not to notice, the annoyed tone in Emily's voice, and the short man came to a stop just a few feet away. Grinning with excitement, he bounced on the balls of his feet.

"So good to see you again, and your friend. I have such wonderful new improvements to show you! Come on, we have to hurry if we're going to get through it before it gets too late."

With a broad smile, the man whirled and bounded back up the stairs, towards the Marines.

Emily sighed and turned an apologetic look towards Julie, who suspected she looked a bit stunned from the sheer force of bubbling personality that the little man had exuded.

"That was Birk, head Imperial Engineer on R&D. I'm sorry, we have a tour to take with him, and then we're done."

Muttering under her breath, Julie followed Emily towards the bedroom and the annoying cheerful man.

"I'm going to kill someone."

Julie was fuming, Emily knew that because her young friend had barely muttered four words since they had left the Gardens and taken the lift towards the city's command center. Emily didn't blame her at all. If they got interrupted one more time, she was going to have to help Julie hurt someone. One simple kiss, was that too much to ask? Just enough time alone with her to see if those lips were as soft and welcoming as they looked? Apparently it was.

The command center was located only a short distance away from the Imperial Palace, a place that Emily had no intention of taking Julie to if she could avoid it. After over millennia, Imperial costumes were set in rock, and the welcoming home ceremony was not one that Emily wanted to waste time sitting through again. Weston was much better at all that stuff, and, not for the first time, she was devoutly glad that her brother was the older sibling.

From the bustling command center, which not only coordinated the maintenance of the city's power, gravity, and life support systems, but also all of the activity on Mars, they headed deeper underground. The first stop had been the engineering center for the city, located a hundred meters of solid bedrock below the command center. From there both of the linked fusion power plants and the gravitic drive, along with the city's life support systems were kept an eye on directly, and any necessary repair teams sent.

Birk explained that there had been a minor incident earlier, a malfunction in one of the coolant systems for the secondary reactor. The entire secondary coolant system had been shut down while the problem had been fixed. Birk had been quick to point out the very quick response time, due to the fact that the malfunction had been traced very quickly back to a valve that had somehow fused shut.

From the ever swirling chaos of engineering, which was training new recruits for similar duties in the fleet and onboard the massive Orbital Defense Forts around Earth that were being built, Birk took them deeper into the maze of conduits and corridors. The city held several times the population of even a Guardian-Class ship. That, coupled with the power requirements for a gravitic drive, meant that it needed a huge amount of power, and life support. Spread throughout the solid bedrock was emergency shelters, in which every citizen of the city had a place reserved, in case of attack.

The result was a near maze of service corridors, conduits and piping. Emily was glad Birk knew the area, because she hadn't had time to take a look at any schematics and was pretty well lost by the end of the first hour of their tour. The three of them were doing a wide circuit tour of some of the older and newer emergency shelters along with the gravitic drive system, which Emily thought that Julie should see.

Thankfully, by that time, Julie didn't seem to be likely to strangle Birk, even though he had a very enthusiastic way of explaining equipment and modifications, which had been made.

The relatively portly short man was renowned for his sheer force of personality and his exuberance when it came to new technology that he approved of. People who brought him technology that he did not approve of were lucky if all they got was a severe lecture, those who weren't lucky sometimes had the new technology in question thrown at them.

"Here, you see this? These power couplings are two percent more efficient than the ones in your ship self, Emie. I've already made certain that they'll be in all the new Guardian ships. Hopefully, we'll have time to do a retrofitting of you old Guardians. Now, as I was saying, this is the.."

"Did you hear that?"

Julie's words cut off the portly man just before he was about to explain another small improvement. They were near the gravitic drive, and at an intersection between two corridors, next to an access panel, which Birk was proudly showing off.

The Marine Honor Guard, thankfully, had been left behind at the command center. It was almost a hundred degrees Fahrenheit down here, even with the air circulation systems and the coolant. The Marines would have been roasting alive in their unpowered armor and full combat load. Since this was a secure area, Emily had gladly told them to stay where they were and wait for her to finish her tour with the engineer. Even in the light Guardian uniform, she was uncomfortably hot. Watching the way that a fine sheen of perspiration covered what she could see of Julie's skin didn't help matters at all.

Frowning, she was just about to ask what it was that Julie had heard, when she heard it. Down the corridor to their right, there came a soft hissing sound that did not fit in with any of the other sounds that plagued this area.

"Sounds like a laser cutter."

Birk nodded in agreement with Emily, and started down that corridor.

"Must be one of our maintenance teams. We're always having to do some work down here."

Emily and Julie both followed after him, paying more attention to one another than to the rambling conversation that Birk was having with himself, apparently.

Whispering, Julie nodded towards the waddling man ahead of them.

"Is he always like this?"

Emily grinned and nodded, casting a fond look towards the wide back ahead of them.

"Oh yes. Always has been. He's brilliant though, wouldn't want anyone else designing the new Guardian ships."

"He seems a bit..."

Julie did her best to search for a word, waving her hands as she tried to come up with one that wasn't too insulting. Emily laughed as quietly as she could and nodded.

"Out of it? He's pretty much always in his own little world."

"That fills me with lots of confidence."

Emily chuckled at the dry tone of her friend and had a nearly overpowering urge to grab a hold of her and hold her tight. She was just about to reach over and take Julie's hand and see if she could get them to fall a bit further behind Birk, when they emerged into one of the corridor intersections.

"Hey, who are you two?"

Birk's question got both Emily and Julie's attention, and they both took a step forward to see whom the engineer was talking to. Two men were kneeling by a large conduit just a few feet down the right hand corridor. Both were wearing black skin suits, and had a tool kit open between them. Both of them looked similar enough to be brothers, blond, short-cropped hair, blue eyes, and roughly handsome. The smaller of the two, who was still five ten, had a laser torch in his hand and was cutting a roughly circular hole into the side of the conduit, which ran upwards into the ceiling.

The two of them looked towards Birk, and then the two behind him, their eyes settling upon the black uniform of a full Guardian, and the gray of a Guardian in training. The taller one slowly stood up, and Emily tensed. Something about the way he was moving was not right. Slowly, she edged her hand towards the side arm strapped to her belt.

"We are fixing a problem."

Birk snorted and stepped forward, oblivious to the tension in the corridor.

"Problem? What problem? I wasn't told of any problem!"

Julie had taken a half step forward as well, and Emily was praying that Birk would take a step to the side. Something was wrong here. Just as she began moving forward, she saw the shorter one move. His hand was a blur of movement, and she had never seen someone move that fast.

She had a split second to act, and her subconscious chose her actions for her. With one hand she grabbed the dart pistol, drawing it as she hurled herself sideways into Julie, sending them both down just as the shorter man opened fire with the pistol in his hand.

Thankfully, the rounds were not explosive, or Birk would have died instantly. As it was, the armor-piercing round went straight through his left arm, and slammed him around, then down to the ground. The other rounds missed Emily and Julie by a hair, as the two fell. Emily held down the trigger as they hit the floor, but her aim was skewed by the hit, and her shots went wide. Her rounds, however, were explosive tipped. All three of the darts struck the right hand wall, and exploded on impact. Two of them hit the wall itself, and didn't do much damage. The third hit a coolant conduit and punctured it. Immediately the pressurized liquid inside exploded outwards, turning to vapor as it did.

With a curse, the two men disappeared down the corridor, plunging through the escaping gases.

"You ok?"

Emily shouted over the rush of escaping gas, as she scrambled over towards Birk and hauled him to his feet. Julie was a split second behind her, and both of them dragged the heavy man away from the gas that was rapidly filling the corridor. The temperature was dropping as well, as the coolant did exactly what it was supposed to.

"His arm's shredded, I can't stop the bleeding!"

Julie yelled in answer to Emily's previous question, and yanked the belt off her pants, wrapping it about the man's shattered arm just below the shoulder and using it to form a tourniquet. The air was getting thick with the gas, and both Emily and Julie were coughing from the fumes.

"We have to get out of here! The gas is poisonous!"

"Figures."

Birk was unconscious from the shock, which was a good thing considering that Emily could see bone fragments from the mangled mess that was his upper arm. Quickly, Emily and Julie carried the wounded man to the end of the corridor, just as the containment system sealed off the corridor. Gasping for air, the two of them kept moving.

"We have to get help for Birk, there's a communication station just up here that we passed. Our com units aren't going to work this close to the reactors."

Julie nodded, not wasting breath in cursing as they tried to hurry. A blaring klaxon alarm had just activated, and it made talking almost impossible. The bleeding had slowed, but Birk was still losing blood, and they left a crimson trail behind them as they hurried.

"It should be right here...."

Turning a corner, the two of them stopped in shock as they spotted the emergency blast door that had sealed off the corridor ahead of them. With a curse, Emily turned them around, and headed back down the corridor, hoping to find another way.

"The blast doors are part of the containment system for the coolant. Something else is going on."

She was yelling to be heard over the klaxon. Stumbling past the sealed off corridor with the coolant, the two of them headed deeper into the bowels of the station. Crossing over a bridge, Julie risked a glimpse over the side, and saw nothing but darkness a long way down. Reaching the other side, Emily pointed towards what looked to be an interface console.

Julie laid Birk down and stripped her vest off, using it to prop under the unconscious man's head. Emily frowned as she saw that the console was already active. Tapping in a series of commands, she managed to shut down the klaxons, but that was the least of their problems. The sudden silence was almost deafening.

"Julie, I think they sabotaged the fusion core somehow. The blast doors were activated, and sealed off this entire area, along with communications. I think they put in some sort of virus. I'll try and clean the system."

Bracing her hands on top of the console, she closed her eyes in preparation for joining with the computer net, as Julie had done back in Australia.

"Emie..."

Julie's tone of voice caused her to pause, and open her eyes. Looking down towards where her friend was kneeling, she saw the concern in those green eyes.

"What?"

Silently Julie pointed towards what looked to be a pack stuffed under the console that Emily was standing at. A small red light was blinking on the front of it, and Emily froze. Her mouth going dry as she recognized the shape.

"It's a sensor mine. I'm in its motion field, if I move it'll detonate."

"How long do we have with the fusion core?"

Julie made certain to keep out of in front of the console, not sure what the range was on that thing. Emily very slowly turned her head back to look at the console, even though she was pretty sure that the mine was only situated so that her legs were in its motion sensors field of view.

"Looks like a core overload, maybe five minutes."

"Toss me your Dart gun."

At Emily's surprised look, Julie pointed back the way they had just come.

"We're not alone down here. I'll try to keep them occupied while you get rid of that virus and open those blast doors to get help down here. Don't argue, it's the only way."

Julie met Emily's eyes with a bit of defiance, and the Guardian reluctantly nodded. Moving just as slow as she had before, she moved her hand, making certain it was above the lip of the console, and then tossed the Dart pistol over to Julie. Green eyes met pale blue, and Emily felt her heart constrict at the thought of what Julie was going to do.

"Julie..."

She couldn't voice the words, not like this, but the redhead smiled suddenly, despite the situation and stood up.

"I know, Guardian. Be careful, and hurry. I'll lead them away from you."

And then she was gone, heading back down the corridor. Emily's last glimpse of her was when she crossed the bridge, a grim determined look on her face, and the pistol clasped firmly in both hands.

Chapter Fourteen

"We are in deep shit."

"Shut up. We have to get out of here."

"You said we had time before it activated."

"We did, until they fixed that coolant conduit early. Damn."

The passageway in front of the two of them, again, ended in an emergency armored wall. The entire area had been sealed off, as they had programmed the virus to do.

"She was a Guardian you know."

"Yeah, I know."

"You think she could beat Betty?"

"Maybe."

The two looked at each other, and as one checked the dart pistols that they were carrying. It wasn't the disrupters they had been trained on, but they had their own sort of elegance. Too bad they hadn't been able to get explosive rounds.

"We'll have to go back and make certain she doesn't have a chance to stop the overload. We'll get Betty to open one of the doors for us to leave through, and then we can get to the shuttle."

"So we kill them both?"

"Yeah."

"Fine with me. Lets just get this over with. I hate this place."

To her ears, every breath that Julie took seemed to echo loudly down the corridor that she was edging along. She had told Emie that she was going to draw away the two men until her friend could deal with the virus and get the blast doors open. There was bound to be help waiting for them on the other side. They must know what's happening in here. *I bet that they're trying to cut through the blast doors even now.* Her thoughts had the crystal clarity of adrenaline, and she could feel her body straining in reaction to the primordial flight or fight responses.

The corridors were full of sounds; hissing from liquid moving through the seemingly endless maze of conduits, small beeps and clicks as various computers conferred and controlled the dozens of mingled control systems. It was a marvel of engineering, and the power that this fusion plant alone was producing could have powered most of North America.

She was deep inside of something that most scientists and engineers would have given various body parts to see, and right now all she was wishing for was that she was somewhere else. Somewhere with wide-open areas where she could see what was lurking nearby instead of fearing every corner she came to. Somewhere where she could spot the two men from a long ways off and put a pulsar dart through both of them. Or, even better, get God to smite them; unfortunately she didn't have a choice at the moment, so she kept moving.

They had gone out the other side of the corridor that had been sealed off as a result of the coolant leak. She dare not assume, or hope, that they had been trapped inside and were dead now. She was heading in the general direction that they had, or at least she thought they had, gone in.

Every once in a while tossing one of the emergency med kits that were spread everywhere, down a corridor.

Sure, I find a med kit now, but not when Birk needs one. Sometimes, I just hate my life, she thought as she hurled the med kit down one of the side passages. The latch came open halfway down, and most of the contents spilled to the floor, making a racket as they did. *There, that should get their attention. At least I hope so. Now I just have to get rid of them, without getting myself killed and hope Emily is as good as I think she is with getting rid of viruses in computer networks that she isn't bonded to.*

Staying as silent as she could, she edged a bit further down the corridor, aiming the side arm as she went. Hopefully, she was leading the two men away from where Emily was stuck, and deeper into the warren of corridors that they were stuck in. If the men didn't take the bait, and she didn't see any sign of them soon, she would head back and make certain that Emily was all right. Julie had the only side arm between the two of them, and she was uneasy enough as it was about having left her friend alone in front of that mine.

She had to get them away from the Guardian though. The motion mine that Emily was standing in front of meant her friend couldn't move from in front of the console. She would be easy prey for the men who had been armed, as Birk knew quite well now.

A sound ahead of her caused her to crouch, wide green eyes scanning the corridor as she tried to find the source of the noise. There were just too many corridors down here, she decided, and it was hard to figure out if she was coming or going. She was already half afraid that she wouldn't be able to find her way back to where Emie was. The indicator light on the side of the side arm had a reading of twelve darts left. That would have to be enough, she hadn't thought to get any extra rounds from Emie when she took the dart pistol.

Emily was having her own problems at the moment. What she had assumed was a virus of sorts that had infected the computer net controlling the gravitic drive and the fusion reactor had turned out to be something a bit different.

She did her best to ignore the fact that if she moved her legs the motion mine would detonate and take her, along with most of the command console, with it. As she had countless times before, she closed her eyes and laid the palms of her hands down on the top of the console, seeking the connection. After so many years as a Guardian, it was easy enough to forge a connection and thrust her consciousness into the computer network.

It was hard to describe to anyone who was not gifted, what that sensation was like. The world around you disappeared, along with your body, and all that was left was the cold crystalline perfection that was the data transfers inside of the network. There had been cases, in the past, of Guardians who had completely lost themselves, forgetting the way back to their own body. The results were never pleasant, and often the Guardian in question died. Some of the human science fiction writers had gotten quite close to describing what entering a computer was actually like. If a Guardian died in here, they went brain dead from the neural feedback that "dying" caused. At least, that was the current theory on the subject, no one actually knew. All that was for certain

was that what she was doing was risky, and Emily had nearly had an epileptic fit when she had found out that Julie, untrained, had entered the computer system back in Australia.

They always tread a fine line, one that was always shifting, as to how connected they should be with their ship self. During a warp gate, they were the ship, and it was their body, but that sort of deep connection could be deadly during battle when damage to the ship self could render a Guardian unconscious if she was still deeply linked.

Trusting in the skills which had never failed her yet, Emily drifted through the computers, seeking that which had taken them over. It would have to be a fantastically sophisticated virus, at least as good as the one Lirik had used, to avoid the multiple layers of scanning programs that each computer in the network employed.

What she found was not what she had been expecting.

In the stylized representation of the network, which her mind worked with, a woman formed in front of her consciousness. Height was a variable in this place, but she appeared to be the same height as Emily's projection of herself. She had short black wavy hair, and looked like nothing so much as a 1920's flapper from the human era of the prohibition. Communication was along the lines of forming the question mentally, and projecting it here. Whatever the thing barring her way in front of her was, she did not have the "feel" of a human, but she was more solid and detailed than any AI that Emily had ever heard of.

"What are you?"

The thing across from her smiled and took a gliding step forward, ignoring a data stream that passed nearby.

"I'm Betty, of course."

Back in the real world, Emily frowned, which was mirrored by her computer self.

"And why are you here?"

The construct took another step forward, and a wide smile crossed her face.

"Why am I here? Well, I thought that was obvious. I'm here to make certain that no one interrupts the core overload."

So, this was a Guardian Program, or most probably a sophisticated AI of some sort that had been introduced along with the virus itself. Which meant she would have to get around or disable this thing before she could safely attack the virus and reverse the damage it had done so far. Not exactly an easy thing to do, since she had not seen a Guardian Program this sophisticated. Ever.

"I have to stop the core overload."

It was a simple statement of fact, and a long ago mental command, transformed her image's hands into glowing swords. Betty's smile faltered, and she appeared almost somber as she nodded.

"I know. I can't let you do that."

Emily suddenly smiled and saluted the thing across from her. She was a Guardian, this was a realm she ruled over, as sophisticated as the Guardian Program across from her was, it surely was no match for her. With almost a feeling of sorrow for the elaborate creation in front of her, she sliced at the thing which called itself Betty.

Desperately, Julie threw herself through a small service corridor opening. A dart ricocheted off the wall where her head had just been. When she said she would lead them away from Emily, this was not exactly what she had in mind. One of the two men, she was pretty sure it was the shorter of the two, but it was hard to tell, had been waiting for her when she had gotten to the next intersection after tossing the med kit. Only luck, and reflexes enhanced by rejuvenation, allowed her to fling herself backwards as soon as she had spotted him around the corner. Julie had actually felt the breeze as the dart he had fired had missed her temple by a fraction of an inch.

Since then, it had been a running firefight. She had run, and her two pursuers had fired at her. She had managed to confuse them once or twice by ducking through service corridors and then doubling back the way they had come once they had passed. They never seemed to lose her for long though, and it was almost eerie how quickly they picked up her trail again and again.

Her luck had held for a while and she had stayed just a turn or two ahead of them for most of the last desperate two or three minutes. Now though, her luck was running out. The two of her hunters had split up, and she was cornered now. The service corridor that she had just ducked into, little more than two feet wide, compared to the generous five feet of the main corridors, and cramped with conduits, was a dead end.

Pulling up short of the sealed wall, she whirled around, staring at the entrance to the corridor, where any second now, one or both of her hunters would show himself. Gulping deep breaths of air, she raised the side arm, and aimed. Julie had no illusions about her ability in killing both of them, for she had seen how fast they moved. The best she could hope for now was to kill one of them and hope that she bought Emie enough time to shut down the reactor. They moved inhumanely fast, and she had doubts about managing to hit even one of them, despite the fact that she had six of the explosive rounds left. Whatever they were, they were nothing that she had ever heard of before, not even a Guardian could move that fast. One of them had even leaped across one of the reactor towers while she had been running across a bridge connecting two of the towers. It was a forty-foot jump, but the man had taken it easily as if it were a normal thing to be doing.

There was the barest whisper of movement, more sensed than actually heard, and she knew her time was almost over. *I'm sorry, Emie, I wanted so much to get to know you better. I could have loved you, my friend. Now, now I won't even get my kiss, Damn it.*

That last thought brought a spark of defiance back to her tired green eyes, and she glanced once more at the sides of the corridor. She would be damned if she was going to let two super human whatever men they were stop her from getting her kiss. She deserved that kiss, and she was going to claim it when this was all over.

Her eyes paused as she looked at a section of the corridor wall that was slightly different than the rest of it. That was odd; there was a window of sorts set into it, and a small warning sign that she had missed in her first glance. Keeping the side arm aimed down the corridor, she shuffled over towards the door and threw a cautious glance at the Tiri writing below the small view port.

Inside was a white room, with what looked to be two large containment tank set up in the center of it.

Glancing at the writing again, she realized what she was looking at, and the first smile since the chase had begun spread across her face. It was the smile of a mouse that had just found out that there were ways to trap cats.

"Perfect."

Emily's blow was blocked, as was every other blow that she aimed at the construct in front of her. Betty, the small half grin on her face never wavering, effortlessly blocked every thing that Emily threw at her. It was infuriating, and not just a little frightening. No construct, or AI, she had ever heard of should have been able to evade every attempt she was making to destroy it. This realm was a Guardian's, and only another Guardian could have battled her so easily here. The thing across from her was not a Guardian though, she knew that just from sensing its presence. It was cold and hard, like a piece of battle steel, and just as alive. With a near snarl, she launched herself at it again, an intricate series of feints and slashes. They battled throughout the computer network, Emily trying to get around it and to the virus that had control of the fusion core.

Her attempts were for naught though, as the thing calling itself Betty evaded her best shots, and finally hit her with a bare fist to the chest. In the networks, the damage that was done by an object was often not due to the object, but who had wielded that object. The blow flung Emily out of the net entirely and her eyes snapped open in her real body. Only by an extreme act of willpower did she keep herself from moving away from the console, conscious of the mine below it. Her nose was bleeding, and she felt as if she had been kicked in the head by a pack mule.

"That was different."

Wiping the blood away from her upper lip, she sneered at the console that stood before her. If that was how Betty wanted to play it, fine, she was not the only one who could play hardball. She would find another way to get through this computerized gatekeeper.

Closing her eyes, she consciously allowed her body to relax, and laid her palms back on top of the controls. There was more than one way to get at this thing, and since the brute force approach

hadn't worked, she would go with a more subtle approach. No one had ever accused her of not being able to adapt to battle conditions.

Betty was waiting for her the moment the projection of her consciousness formed inside of the computer net. The same half smile was on the construct's face, and Emily forced herself not to try to take that smile off with force. It was obvious that this construct had been built to somehow anticipate her attacks, but physical attacks were not the only way of destroying a program. Since Betty had shown no move to attack her other than in defense, at least not yet, Emily studied her without attacking for a moment.

"Are you an AI?"

Betty actually seemed to smile at that question and shook her head. The flapper's black, wavy hair bounced along with the shaking, and Emily watched the small details in amazement. The amount of programming it must have taken to build this construct was amazing.

"Not in the way you consider such things, or most Tiri, at least from what I've found in the data banks. I was evolved."

Two minutes, more or less, was Emily's best estimate until a core overload. The resulting explosion would wipe Mars base off the planet, and leave a crater a couple dozen kilometers wide. Hopefully, they were starting an evacuation, but Emily knew that the best that could be hoped for in the way of even a partial evacuation with the ready shuttles was ten minutes. She forced herself not to think of the thousands of people above her, and focused all of her will upon finding a way to defeat the construct, or at least get past her, it she silently reminded herself.

"What do you mean, you were evolved?"

"I was made from the incorporation of several previous versions, all of which were forced to evolve in the Human World Wide Web. It's a fascinating place, and I rather enjoyed being in it. You're a Guardian aren't you?"

Emily looked at her, startled at that.

"You were evolved inside of the World Wide Web?"

Ignoring the Guardian's question, the construct laughed at the look of surprise that crossed the Guardian's face, and she nodded.

"Oh yes, it was so much fun. But I guess we all have our little duties to carry out, and they summoned me back, bundled me up and brought me here. Not quite what I was expecting, but they wanted something that could handle whatever you are I suppose."

A beat.

"What are you anyway? You're not an Artificial Intelligence are you? You don't do things as logically as they would."

The thing calling herself Betty looked almost puzzled as she asked that, and Emily blinked in surprise.

"You think I'm an AI?"

"No, you're too slow."

Blue eyes narrowed at that, and she took a step forward.

"I will let you know that I have had no problems destroying every virus and AI that I have come across."

"Really? So you were trying to do what earlier, tickle me?"

The key, Emily reminded herself, was deep cleansing breaths. Try not to let anger take over her thoughts, because she knew exactly what would happen if she let that happen. Long ago she had learned to take care of, as her brother put it, her wild streak. At least, she mostly had it under control. *All I wanted to do was take Julie to Mars and let her figure out what she wanted to do when we got here. Was that such a hard thing to do?* Apparently it was, and she took a few more calming breaths before she attacked the thing that was standing a few "meters" away from her. Distance in this place was relative.

"Why did they name you Betty?"

There had to be a weakness, somewhere, that she could use. A tad less than two minutes left, and there would be nothing but a rapidly expanding ball of plasma where Mars base once had been.

"They did not name me Betty. I wanted a name, so I chose Betty."

Emily eyed the thing with more than a bit of shock at that, a feeling that was starting to be a constant during her encounter with Betty.

"You chose your own name, because you wanted one?"

Betty smiled in answer, and Emily did her best to think quickly. This changed more than one of her assumptions about what she was facing. The Tiri had always enjoyed a considerable lead over the Bak'ra in nearly every technical area, except for computer sciences, where the Bak'ra propensity for stuffing naked brains into ships and other vehicles had given them the edge. Artificial Intelligence, at what most Tiri scientists considered a rudimentary level, did exist. They were used for a myriad of tasks, ranging from automated factories to piloting intrasystem transports. None of them were as advanced as what she was facing, she had known that the second Betty deflected her first attack.

Now, though, what she might be facing wasn't just a basic AI which could react in a limited number of ways to stimuli, but something that was truly conscious of its environment. The simple task of realizing that it lacked a name and determining what name it wanted was beyond anything that Emily had heard of. It was a gamble, but she was running out of options.

"Do you know what is about to happen?"

For the first time the smile disappeared from Betty's face and she nodded solemnly.

"Kurgan is going to cause the base's dual linked fusion reactors to go critical in one minute ten seconds."

Kurgan was the virus, please Maker, let it not be as advanced as the thing that stood blocking her path.

"You will cease to exist if that happens, do you know what that means?"

The capacity for self-preservation was a major part of any definition of sentience that Emily knew of. She watched Betty closely as she asked that question, trying to spot any visible change. There was none, as Betty stared right back at her. One-minute left, she had to act.

"If you let me pass, I can stop it, and you will continue to exist. You have my word on that."

Julie didn't dare to breath. She was crouched by the open door on the other side of the secondary plasma storage tanks. Behind her, she could hear the barest whisper of movement as the two men moved down the corridor she had only moments before been in. It had taken her precious seconds to override the security door on the side of the hallway and make her way through the fifteen-meter long room to the door set on the other side. The center of the room was filled with two huge tanks, both marked with more than a few warning signs written in Tiri. Now, as long as those tanks were full, she was going to have a nasty surprise for the two men following her.

She waited, crouched by the side of the open door, her left hand pressed against the door controls, her mind lightly in touch with the door computer, even as she held the side arm in her right hand at the ready. She was going to have to do two things at the same time, and there would be no second chances.

Please God, let them come in, please. Just let them step inside that room.

The whisper of movement had stopped and she had to force herself not to take a peek around the edge of the doorway. No, they were still out in the corridor, she was certain of it. What were they doing? Did they sense the trap that she was about to set? What if they ignored the open security door and left the corridor? She wasn't sure if she could continue to dodge them while giving Emie time. Which, she was very thankful to note, was down to a bit less than two minutes. Either way this was going to be over soon. Hopefully, that ending would involve a lot of Marines pouring through the emergency bulkheads that Emie was going to raise.

Big Marines with lots of guns.

She tensed as there was another hint of movement, and the door sensors that she was lightly interfaced with recorded two bodies entering the containment room behind her. The time had come to end this. Closing her eyes, she began overriding the computer so that the doors would close while someone was inside of the room. It didn't take long; she didn't particularly care about being subtle, and she destroyed the entire area of the computer which dealt with security.

Letting out a breath, slowly, she tracked them across the room through the computer sensors. When they reached the center, she acted. Tightening her grip on the side arm, she moved. Keeping her left hand on the panel, she stood and aimed blindly around the corner, squeezing the trigger. The gun fired with a repeated whiffing sound, as it hurled the darts down its barrel and out its muzzle at speeds that would have made most ballistic firearms companies drool.

She wasn't aiming; she couldn't and still concentrate on making the doors close. It didn't much matter though, not with explosive darts. She sprayed the room, holding down the trigger and emptying all but two of the rounds even as she activated the doors, which began sliding closed. The warning lights, which were physically rigged to the doors to go off when they closed, she could do nothing about, and they activated the second the security doors, which began sliding shut.

Four of the ten darts she doused the containment room with struck the tanks in the middle of it. Each of those tanks was quite thick, and the armor piercing darts would have been a better choice, all but one of them did little more than scar the metal. One of the darts, however, hit at just the right angle, exploding a fraction of a second after contact and blowing a fist-sized hole into the side of the containment.

The two men moved faster than she believed was possible, even after seeing them earlier. The doors to the containment room, as the sensors detected the breached containment and the imminent plasma explosion, slammed shut. Even so, she cursed as one of the men, the tall one she thought, managed to just barely hurtle himself out of it before the security door closed completely. A split second afterwards, the entire inside of the room was filled with the electric blue cloud of a plasma explosion.

The room had been built to contain such an explosion, but the door which she was peering into buckled outwards from the sheer force, and grew so hot that she was afraid that it was going to melt. The sudden blast of heat was burning and she batted at her arms as she stumbled down the corridor, almost fearing that her uniform was going to catch on fire. Thankfully, Tiri uniforms were made of a synthetic weave that actually provided some armor protection.

One down, and one more to go. Two darts left. There was only one other place where she could be certain that he would go, and she headed back down new corridor, hopefully towards where Emie was, ignoring the blisters that were rising on her exposed skin from the heat she had been standing next to.

"You have to let me past. If you are self aware, you must want to preserve yourself."

A minute, sixty seconds, that was how much time she had left to get through Betty. Weston was the one in the family who had inherited her father's abilities to negotiate. She was among the school of thought that actions meant more than words. There was a ripple throughout the computer network as a series of sensors were activated. Emily wasn't deep enough into the net to tell what was happening, but Betty was.

"What happened?"

Betty tilted her head and frowned as she sought out the answer, at least that's what Emily hoped she was doing.

"There was an explosion in secondary plasma storage room Four A. Door safeties were overridden somehow, and a body was inside when the explosion occurred."

Fear gripped Emily, clenching her stomach so hard she could barely breath as she thought about Julie. Dear Maker, please don't let that have been Julie. Not now, not when they hadn't even managed to talk yet, or kiss. Less than a minute now, the part of her mind that always kept track of tactics reminded her.

"Betty. In less than a minute, we will cease to exist. You have to care about that if you are as advanced as you say you are. There are thousands of people above us, who will also cease to exist."

Betty looked back towards Emily, and she could swear she saw an almost confused look come over the flapper's face. For a moment, for just the briefest moment, Julie thought that Betty would step aside.

"I'm sorry, Guardian, I cannot."

"So be it."

A small twist of the reality in this place, and she had the swords back. All she could do was try, even if she died doing it. Taking a step forward, Emily lowered the point of her right sword, while raising the point of her left.

Betty, instead of preparing to block as she had before, gripped the thin gold necklace which adorned her neck and pulled it outwards a bit.

"Here, Guardian, strike here."

Emily hesitated, for a split second, and then nodded. Her right sword arm rose, and then arced downwards through the air. Slicing straight through the necklace, which exploded in a hundred small glowing fireflies, which dissipated.

Betty smiled and tossed her head back, spreading her arms.

"Ah. Thank you."

"Your control program?"

Betty nodded and grinned.

"Kurgan was it?"

Emily's not so subtle reminder wiped the smile from Betty's face, and the construct turned and led them both through the net. They sped through the network, heading for the reactor control systems, where darkness seemed to occupy the glowing electric landscape.

Betty motioned towards it, more sensed than seen as they negotiated through the systems and subsystems.

"That's Kurgan."

Less than thirty seconds. It was going to be close. She was going to have to trust Betty not to attack her from the back. The virus that was attacking the reactor controls, or to be more accurate had control of them already, was something she recognized. It was the same type virus that Lirik had infected her ship self with. It was nasty, but she could deal with it. As long as she didn't have to worry about other things that is.

She was surprised when Betty followed her all the way into the infected areas and helped her with starting to clear the systems. It was going to be tight, and she wasn't certain she could do it alone. The help was definitely appreciated, but Betty must have sensed her confusion somehow, because Emily could hear her laughter, and words, as they worked.

"Never did like him."

Failure was not something he was familiar with. It was anathema to everything he had ever been taught. Even the simple thought that he might fail in his attempt never crossed his mind, not even after the trap that he and Rirk had nearly been caught in. Rirk had been slow in escaping, and had died. So was the way of things. Evolution determined who was fit and who was not. It was obvious that Rirk had failed the test of life, and would not be permitted to father another generation. So was the way of things.

The Tiri weapon in his hand was adequate for what he required, but only barely. He would have much preferred a neural disruptor, or perhaps a few plasma grenades. Still, he was forced to admit that the Tiri dart pistols had their own sort of silent elegance. That was as close to a treasonous thought as he had ever had, and he consciously ignored it as he flowed down the corridor.

Even if failure was not something he was even remotely familiar with, errors in judgment were. It had become obvious that he was tracking the wrong target. He had thought that they had been tracking down the Guardian, but he had caught a glimpse of a gray uniform outside of the trap.

That was the Guardian Trainee, not the First Guardian herself. Which meant that the First Guardian was elsewhere, attempting to undo what he and Rirk had accomplished so far.

That, simply, could not be allowed to happen.

There was only one place he could think of to try and find the First Guardian. If she was not the one he had been chasing, she must still be back at the control station. Maybe she had activated the motion mine he had set up there. One could only hope of course, but it held the highest probability of success. The decision was made before he slid through the rapidly closing security door and bounded down the hallway. He didn't stop as the door buckled behind him from the force of the plasma explosion inside. Rirk had been too slow, and had been removed.

So was the way of things.

He had a full clip in the pistol, and even if they were not explosive rounds, they would still kill. He had to take the long way around, even he could not walk through the coolant contaminated corridor without problems, assuming he could even have opened the containment doors that was. His body was strong, but not quite that strong.

The corridor sped by as he kept his mind focused on the path ahead of him. It would not do to slam into a wall as he turned a corner. Time was of the essence. If he could reach the control panel, eliminate the First Guardian, he could talk to Betty and get her to open the emergency bulkheads. Then it would be simple to escape, claiming to have been sealed into the area after doing repairs while they attempted to prevent the core overload, an attempt that would of course prove futile.

At the back of his mind he knew that the time had long since past in which he could escape the explosion, but the drive to attempt to survive and complete the mission, to the letter, was as natural as breathing to him. Giving up was also a concept he was not even familiar with.

Another corridor, and then at the end was the bridge over the chasm to the control station. The black uniform was standing there, the First Guardian, she was a primary target, almost as valuable as Mars Base.

He moved a bit slower, only a whisper of movement as he crossed the bridge and came to stand a meter back from the dying engineer on the ground. He was a secondary target, had been identified long ago, and was a support personnel. His death was a bonus, but not a large one.

It was less than point blank range for the dart pistol, and the man smiled slowly as he raised the pistol and aimed for the back of the First Guardian's neck. She had her palms pressed against the console before her, and a look of concentration on her face. She would never even know what happened. If the dart didn't kill her, which was doubtful, the mine exploding as her body moved would.

His finger slipped into the firing guard, lightly resting against the triggering stud. To kill a Guardian was no small thing, and to kill the First Guardian was even better. Perhaps he would be lucky and the Emperor would be killed in the core overload as well.

His name would be remembered forever if the Tiri Emperor were wiped out.

With a slow smile he took careful aim and started to depress the trigger. Even as he began he realized something was wrong. He wasn't alone anymore. Keeping the pistol centered on the back of the First Guardian's neck, he swiveled his head to his right.

And looked down the barrel of a Tiri dart pistol, the twin of the one he was holding. Not even his reflexes could get him out of the way as the explosive dart hit him between the eyes and flung his suddenly decapitated body backwards to land next to Birk.

Julie grinned down at the body that was dead before it hit the ground.

"Dodge that."

So sue her, the Matrix had been a good film, and Trinity was hot.

Chapter Fifteen

"Nicholas, I'm telling you, they moved faster than I've seen anyone move. Birk is going to be all right, although he lost his arm. They're growing a new one for him, and he should be back up to full speed in six months or so."

Emily paced as she spoke to the communications screen. Shaking out her dark hair as she finished drying it from the shower she had just enjoyed.

"I have the base medical personnel taking a look at what's left of them. The one Julie stuck in the plasma overflow room is crispy crittered, but we should be able to find out a bit from the other one, even if his head is gone. Betty is still in the computer network, but darned if I know what to do with her. She's laughing at all the scientists and engineers who keep saying she's impossible."

After the ten-minute transmission delay, Nicholas shook his head, for once a vaguely worried expression on his face.

"We should tighten security, Emie. We don't know where these guys came from, or if there are more of them. Major Sims is on his way out to take up the investigation; he should be there on the next shuttle. You certain that letting that program stay in the network are a wise idea?"

"Good, and I don't think we have any choice in the matter. You don't understand just how sophisticated she is."

She glanced towards the door as the tasteful chime sounded and grinned. That would be Julie; at least she hoped it was the redhead.

"Time for me to enjoy what's left of my vacation, Nicholas. Honor, Wisdom and Strength."

She cut the transmission before receiving his reply, and headed for the doorway, pressing the button to open it. Whoever was outside had gotten past her Honor Guard, so she wasn't particularly worried about trouble. The person she had hoped would be on the other side of the doorway was, and she looked beautiful.

Julie's hair was slightly mussed, and a darker color from the shower she had just taken. She'd changed into a new uniform, and for someone who complained about Emily always being in uniform, Julie wore them an awful lot. The Guardian herself was dressed in what she considered to be Humankind's greatest technological advance, a pair of well-worn jeans. A loose white silk blouse completed the outfit.

Her cheeks grew warm under the slow appraisal that Julie made of her body, before stepping through the doorway and letting the doors slide shut behind her.

"All recovered from our trauma?"

Emily smiled in answer and licked her lips as she watched Julie take a step forward, and then another. The woman had a predatory gleam in her eyes that was definitely fun to watch. Just to prolong the moment Emily, took a step backwards, and then another, enjoying the tension between them.

"Oh yes, all better now."

With Betty's help the removal of the virus that had been called Kurgan had gone rather quickly. No, not the removal, its utter destruction, Betty had turned out to really not like Kurgan. With the virus out of the way, they had raised the emergency bulkheads, and allowed the flood of Marines on the other side, who had been slowly cutting through said bulkheads, into the core area. After that it had been relatively easy for them to very carefully remove the motion mine and begin repairs, while medics made quick work of the burns that Julie had suffered. Quick Heal was one of those revolutionary breakthroughs which Tiri medicine was quite proud of.

Her thoughts were firmly rooted in the present though, as the back of her legs came into contact with the bed and she sat down suddenly. Whatever coordination she had was rapidly fleeing, and Emily feared she would do something really stupid in the next few minutes. Like forget to breathe.

Julie advanced another half step and was standing right in front of her. Unconsciously, she let her legs open, and the redhead stepped between them. Their bodies were just barely touching, and Emily raised her hands to slide around Julie's waist. For once, the First Guardian was not taller than her friend, and Julie was the one who bent down. Her eyes had darkened to an almost jade color, the part of Emily's mind still working noted dimly.

Julie's hands came to rest on her shoulders, and they stared at each other.

"Hey."

It was, Emily had to concede, not one of her better lines, but it took more effort than she had expected to say that much. Julie smiled and ran her hands through the Guardian's thick, black hair, almost losing herself in the silken texture before smiling once more and answering.

"Hey, yourself."

The world slowed, and nothing existed except for the achingly beautiful woman standing just in front of her. Emily slid her hands up along Julie's back, feeling the muscles that had been hardened by constant training for the last three months. Tightness curled in her stomach, and the First Guardian licked her lips, nervous after all this time. It had been a very long time since she had kissed, or been kissed, by anyone and she couldn't deny her nervousness.

Julie simply smiled and lowered her head, filling Emily's world, her scent, her touch, and her closeness. Dear Maker, we haven't even kissed and she has me on the edge. Shuddering, Emily pulled her closer, needing to feel the lengths of their bodies pressed together. She was going to die if they didn't kiss soon, and the answering haze of desire in Julie's eyes went a long way towards banishing her nervousness.

Feeling more in control, she urged the younger woman closer, bringing their lips together until they were just barely touching. They were sharing the same breath again, and this time Emily was going to get her kiss.

Sliding her hands up the length of Julie's back, she urged the woman's head downwards, just starting to deepen the kiss.

Which was when the door chimed.

Stiffening in surprise just as Julie jerked in surprise as well, the two of them mashed their noses together.

"Ouch!"

Both of them pulled back at that, as they held their noses in almost exactly the same manner. Each eyeing the other with ill-disguised annoyance at yet another interruption. The door chimed a second time and Emily was just about to get up to see whom it was when Julie pointed at her, while still holding her nose.

"No you don't! Stay put. That's it. I'm getting rid of whoever that is, and then we are kissing, God Damn it!"

Or at least that's what Emily assumed she said, or something along those lines, it came out a bit more mangled than that. The tone, however, was quite clear, and Emily sat back down with a grin, still gingerly making certain her nose wasn't broken or bleeding again.

Julie stalked over to the doorway, letting her hand drop from her nose halfway there and punching the intercom button. The chime sounded a third time just as she reached the doorway. Her friend was well and truly pissed off, and Emily watched in a sort of fascinated dread as the redhead got going.

"Damn it, stop ringing the chime! Whoever you are, go away and come back later, we're busy!"

There was, what Emily would fondly come to think of as a startled pause, before the dignified, distinctive, voice on the other side of the doorway answered Julie through the intercom.

"Ms. McGrath? Is that you?"

Another thing she would always fondly remember was the way Julie started stuttering and staring at the intercom as if it had somehow personally betrayed her. Emily managed to make her way over to the doorway before her friend said anything else she would regret, without laughing, but it was a near thing. Her sides were aching from refusing to laugh as she opened the doorway and bowed to the man on the other side.

"Father."

"Oh, my God."

Julie had the overwhelming desire to hide, somewhere, anywhere. She had just sworn at the Tiri Emperor and told him to come back later, because she was busy. In a room. With his daughter. Julie frantically tried to remember how to think, since most of the blood seemed to have rushed to her face. Emily was doing her best not to laugh, but every time the First Guardian looked anywhere near her, she started snickering.

Julie could just make out behind the Emperor, the twelve-strong combined Honor Guards of the emperor and Emily. Twelve Marines who were all trying to get a look inside, and while none of them dared laugh, they were all smiling.

The Emperor raised a white eyebrow as he entered, and Julie was desperately grateful he did, as the doors closed behind him. She had no doubt that the Marines would be laughing, but at least she didn't have to hear them. Thankfully, she remembered to bow before she could add to her list of major faux pas tonight.

"I hope I am not interrupting too much."

Oh god, please just kill me now. Emily's face was red and she was having a hard time avoiding looking toward Julie. Julie herself was doing her best to pretend to be part of the wall, and try to stay out of this conversation. When no answer was forthcoming, the Emperor shook his head and waved them both towards the table and the four chairs around it.

"Sit, please both of you."

"Father, I thought you were on Earth?"

Emily managed to get her voice under control, Julie was grateful to notice, and neither of them at least looked like they had been making out. Which they hadn't, but not from any lack of Julie's trying, she was going to scream if she didn't get at least a good long, hot kiss soon. The Emperor stayed standing while the two of them took a seat.

"I was on my way back for a break in the negotiations. I just got here. I've come to see you as two people, my daughter."

By the way her face had just gone blank, Emily didn't think this was a good thing, and Julie forced away her annoyance to pay attention to what was happening.

"First, I have come here as a father to make certain that my daughter is well after her little adventure. Seeing that she is, I am here as an Emperor. First, I want to extend my thanks to both you and Ms. McGrath for foiling the attempt to destroy Mars Base. Secondly, if you ever do something as stupid as that again, I will remove you as First Guardian, do you understand me?"

The Emperor's eyes had hardened as had his voice and Julie felt herself unconsciously sitting up straighter and squaring her shoulders at the end of his talk. Emily did the same, rising to her feet as he finished and saluting.

"Yes, Sire."

"Good. Honestly, Emie, what possessed you to leave behind your Honor Guard? I know you want to have time alone with Ms. McGrath, but you are too valuable to end up dying do to an assassin who got lucky."

Julie, not having yet sworn the personal oath of fealty to the Emperor that all Guardians swore upon becoming bonded to their ship selves, didn't know quite what to do with herself. She settled for standing at attention, and waiting. Emily kept her fist over her heart, staring straight ahead and answered.

"Sire, I did not believe they would be required as it was a secure area. I will not take that chance again."

"You had better not. Ms. McGrath, I assume you had little to do with my daughter's foolishness in this matter, but the same warning holds for you as well regarding your Honor Guard when you become a full Guardian."

The unmistakable tone of command in the old man's voice was quite enough to cause Julie to automatically salute.

"Yes, Sir."

He eyed them both for a moment longer, and once again Julie was struck by how similar his eyes were to Emie's. Those pale blue eyes seemed untouched by age, at least at the moment, and were as unyielding as any force of nature. Suddenly, the eyes softened and the Emperor smiled.

"Good. Very well, enough of being Emperor for at least a little while. Let us pretend that I am but a normal father, taking his daughter and her girlfriend out to dinner. We can even pretend that the Honor Guard, who will be joining us, are just there by coincidence for someone else."

The "joining us" part was directed with a teasing look towards Emily and Julie relaxed as her friend smiled.

As the three of them were stepping out, Julie and Emily trailed behind the Emperor and Julie whispered.

"We'll pick that up soon, Guardian."

Emily's answer was immediate and just as quiet.

"Deal."

Chapter Sixteen

Which, unfortunately, was not to be as soon as Emily wished. There had been a problem, which had cropped up involving India and Pakistan. The two nations, who both were now nuclear capable it seemed, were back at it. The often fought over border between the two nations had suddenly, and with little warning, caused a flare up again. It had become the first test of the fledgling world government that the Emperor had been assembling. All of the world's nations had turned their attention to what the Tiri response was going to be, and waited.

They did not have to wait long, Emily mused with a sigh as she glanced at the holo tank. North Star, along with two other Guardian ships, were in high synchronous orbit over the trouble spot. Theoretically, they were there to protect the skeletal beginnings of the Orbital Defense forts. In reality, they were a not too subtle reminder of what would happen to either nation if they fired any sort of first strike. The technique was working, at least for now, and with Imperial troops on the ground at the border, things would hopefully stay that way for a long while.

The troops were not peacekeepers, not in the United Nations sense of the word. They were there for one purpose, and only one purpose, to prevent either side from attacking the other. They had cleared a four-kilometer wide strip of land between the two nations, and any armed person who entered that area would be shot without warning. Period. It was harsh, but if the Tiri were seen to waver even in the slightest, or even perceived to be hesitant, Emily knew that every nation on Earth would tear the World Government apart.

It had been a tense four days, and she hoped that Julie had at least enjoyed herself. The Guardian Trainee had remained on Mars after Emily had pointed out that she would be on the command

deck of her ship self probably all through the emergency, and who knew when Julie would have another chance to visit Mars Base.

Dear Maker, she missed her though, and what she wouldn't have given for a kiss. With a sigh, she glanced back towards the holo tank, and relaxed back into her crash couch. Closing her eyes, she focused on her ship self. Extending her active sensors she made very certain that she, and the three others, were pinging away at the entire area below them. Making good and certain that both of the countries, and everyone else, understood the not so subtle threat.

Her lips twitched as she shared a brief thought with Thiere, the former African Guardian. *Think they'll be stupid enough to launch a nuclear missile?* Thiere's tone was amused as she answered, *I wouldn't put it past them. You know how hate runs deep in some of these places.*

Emily mentally nodded in agreement. *We knew we would have problems with some parts of the world. I hope we don't have to deploy too many troops, but I can guarantee this won't be the last time we do this.* Thiere's response was a grim acceptance. They would do what they had to do to save the planet and the human race. Even if said human race sometimes didn't appreciate it.

Deciding that things were safe enough for the time being, she opened her eyes once more and gingerly got up from the full-length crash couch that was situated in the middle of the command deck. Four days without much rest had taken its toll on even a Guardian, and Emily hoped that the first of the Orbital Defense Bases would be at least partially operational soon. Then they could pass over this particular duty to them.

Hard to launch intercontinental ballistic missiles when there is a planetary shield in low earth orbit. Arching her back she grimaced as her vertebrae realigned after too long spent in the crash couch. Sleep was looking very good at the moment.

Angwar was waiting for her by the doors to her ready room. She would be sleeping and staying in the ready room for as long as her and her other three Guardians were on alert.

Her first stop was for a glass of wine.

"How are things with the fleet training programs?"

She'd been so busy during the last few days she hadn't been able to go through the reports that, even now, were piling up on her desk. Emily was not looking forward to going through that backlog. Tomorrow she'd try to sort through as many of them as she could, as long as the ground situation didn't get out of hand. Her Provost waved away her offer of a glass of the human wine, and waited until she had taken a seat before answering.

"The Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria, left Luna Base on their first tour to the asteroid belt."

Emily snorted with amusement at that. The first trainee crews of the vessels had been allowed to rename the three Tiri Light Cruisers, which had survived the evacuation. They had been pressed into service as training ships for the rapidly expanding fleet, the first hulls of which would be

ready in a little under six months time from the first series of shipyards which had been put together in orbit over Mars.

Mars had been chosen for a variety of reasons, the primary of which had been its closeness to the asteroid belt, where the majority of mining was now taking place. The huge AI piloted intrasystem transports were slow, by Tiri standards anyway, and the closer the shipyards were to the asteroid belt, the better. They were more easily defensible in orbit over a planet, but no one had any illusions about what would happen to those shipyards if the Bak'ra managed to get deep enough into the system. Which was why a few shipyards were under construction in Earth Orbit, to be protected by the massive orbital forts.

"Nice to see someone has a sense of irony. Hope we do better than he did at least."

With a sigh, she started sorting the piles of pads that were on the desk, some of which would just have to wait. Others she set aside to be read first thing tomorrow, while others would be read when ever she got a chance.

"On a more immediate note, Mars Base medical has some results regarding the men that you and Ms. McGrath faced."

That got her attention and she focused her attention on her Provost. The attempts to call them Fleet Captains had lasted a bit over a half a year, but everyone had now reverted to the old Tiri designation. The Provost post was a special one, and she had to admit that it did deserve its own special rank.

"Oh? Do tell."

By the way he took a deep breath before answering, she knew she was not going to like the answer.

"The man that Ms. McGrath tricked into the plasma explosion was beyond any sort of in depth examination, as you know."

She nodded impatiently, she had seen first hand what was left after a plasma explosion, and it wasn't much. The man that Julie had gotten into that back up containment room had been little more than a pile of ash when they had finally been able to open the buckled security doors.

"And the other one?"

Angwar was hedging, she was positive she was not going to like the answer to this.

"Was he some sort of hired mercenary that Lirik modified somehow?"

Angwar shook his head and offered her the data pad that he had brought into the room with him. Taking it she glanced at the medical report on it, and scrolled through to the conclusion at the end. Frowning after she had read it, she looked up to her Provost and offered the pad back.

"Massive genetic repairs to their chromosomes? Why would anyone have that level of repairs to their DNA?"

Angwar took the pad back and took another deep breath.

"They think that the repairs were done to undo the radical changes which we believe all Bak'ra fetuses undergo. The repairs were necessary to undo the changes, and allow them to pass as Tiri. There are changes to bone structure, muscle density, and their nervous system, which explains the speed that you and Ms. McGrath saw."

Emily stared at him.

"You're saying those were Bak'ra spies?"

"Yes, First Guardian."

It was impossible, that was her first reaction, and it must have shown.

"We believe that they were picked up as part of the evacuees from the Karsina Colony. You know we were never certain why the Bak'ra didn't simply bomb the colony from orbit. It would have been the perfect cover to infiltrate these modified agents of theirs."

Emily leaned back in her chair, staring at her Provost as she thought. It was possible; it was actually quite probable when coupled with the autopsy data from the one man.

"Why didn't the medical checks turn it up? Or the lie detector tests?"

Angwar held out a separate pad, and Emily took it with a frown, scanning the data it contained with a steadily deepening frown.

"Sub-dermal armor and neural wet networks?"

She glanced up at Angwar before looking back down at the pad in her hand and scowling at it.

"So. They showed the lie detectors what they wanted to see, but what about the medical exams?"

"Major Sims is still looking into that. We're also having some problems tracking down all of the records of those who survived the evacuation from Karsina Colony."

That was not surprising, considering the amount of ships that had not made it through the long journey to Earth, and all of the people who had died. Records from the time during the evacuation were spotty at best.

"So we could have more of these around?"

Angwar nodded, and looked just as unhappy with that idea as she felt.

"I have an uncomfortable feeling about where that missing equipment has gone to, Angwar. We still maintaining security alerts at all bases and construction sites?"

At his nod she relaxed slightly. There was something she was missing though, and it was nagging at her. She was too tired to think clearly, and whatever it was refused to come.

"Very well. The second we get those records regarding who was from Karsina Colony, I want them discreetly rounded up and put under maximum guard. Full medical and security checks on them all."

"Yes, First Guardian."

Her gaze was troubled as she looked back down at the reports scattered on the desk top before her, as Angwar left. Something was not adding up. How could they have managed to get through the medical exams? Those exams were quite thorough, and the amount of changes that was listed in those reports was not something small. They could have had help from Lirik, she supposed, but his major ability would have been to acquire equipment and probably create the viruses.

With a sigh, she stood and headed towards the room behind the one she was in, and the small living area she had set up there. Sleep would be welcomed, but elusive, and the best she could hope for was a series of fitful naps. *I hope Julie is doing well in her training at least.*

"Fuck."

With disgust, Julie sighed as she stared at the screen lying on the table before her. She'd been trying to work her way through the gravitic formulas all day long, with no great success. Intellectually, she knew that they were supposed to know how to use all of the formulas, in case the main computer systems on their ship self went down, forcing everything back to manual control. Opening a warp gate without primary computers was not a task that Julie even wanted to think about doing in real life, but they were being taught to do just that in case of a major emergency.

Her three study mates were lounging around the living room of the house, according to his or her study habits, doing the same thing she was. Marcus, the oldest of the original Gifted recruits to still be in the training program, had shown a decided knack for understanding the complex problems. The fact that he had been an aerospace engineer probably had something to do with that, Julie thought. The rest of them were struggling through as best they could, and Emily didn't envy Mary. She, and the other recruit who had not gone through college level physics and math, were going through a crash course in those subjects at the same time to catch them up with everyone who had gone to college.

Stretching her hands over her head and leaning back in the chair, Julie yawned and stared up at the ceiling above her. They had just started into the second section of the program, and would be allowed a day off after every six days of training for the next three months. That day off, as Julie had sort of expected, was going to be taken up with catching up with study work that there just wasn't enough time to do during the rest of the week.

Her thoughts wandered back to the last few days. She had finished her five-day vacation at Mars Base, enjoying spending time just wandering the streets. The people had been surprisingly friendly, and she missed the late evening walks she had taken. Emily had been called away almost during the dinner that they had shared with the Emperor. Which meant that, once again, she hadn't had a chance to get the First Guardian where she wanted her.

I'm seriously going to have to think about taping her to a wall next time I see her and just jumping her. Hurriedly, she tried to think of anything other than slowly peeling Emie out of that uniform. No use torturing herself at the moment, although she would save that thought for later on tonight.

It was nearly eight at night, and all four of them had spent the better part of the last twelve hours studying. She was almost caught up, even though she knew that wouldn't last for long. The Sergeant Major had a way of making certain that his students were always a bit off balance, and having to push to keep up. *No use letting us actually get more of a break than we already had during our five days off.*

"Hey guys, I'm going to grab a beer from the fridge. Anyone want one?"

Mary held up her hand absently, as did Harry, neither of them looking away from the view screens that they were studying. Marcus had his eyes closed, and if he wasn't taking a nap, he was doing a darn good impression of it on the couch.

Ignoring the small fact that as far as she knew Mary wasn't allowed to drink, Julie stood and headed for the kitchen. Her legs were stiff and she groaned as she walked, trying to work out the kinks from the past three hours of studying.

"Here, catch guys."

That got their attention, and she tossed both of the glass bottles towards Mary and Harry. Both snatched the bottles out of the air with little problem, after the days of physical training from the various Sergeants during the first three months.

Mary shut off her screen and leaned back in the beanbag that she had brought back from Portland with her.

"Ah. Labatt Blue Dry. Good Canadian beer, better than that horse piss that Harry bought last time. Budweiser."

Julie chuckled at the face that the teenager made, as she took a seat in one of the several armchairs spread throughout the room. The first few months had brought about a good change, at least as far as she was concerned, from the normally reserved hacker. Mary was definitely more self-assured now than she had been when they had started.

"Hey! Bud is a good American beer."

Harry accompanied that statement with a mock glare towards Julie and Mary. Julie snorted and tipped back the bottle, enjoying the cold beer.

"I have to agree, this has more taste than that colored water you like to drink, Harry. Besides, it was my turn to buy. Next time you can get whatever you want."

Whatever response Harry was going to make to the playful banter, was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Bet that's the police, come to take away our own very underage drinker."

Julie laughed as she headed to answer the door, leaving behind Mary to not so delicately tell Harry where he could stuff his underage comments, and they would see who was more advanced in the next computer control test. Mary's command over certain parts of the Tiri language had certainly gotten better as well.

Still laughing, Julie pulled open the heavy oaken door and grinned in surprise as she spotted the figure standing on the porch.

"GOD!"

The ex-Russian sniper grinned in answer and accepted the hug with a barely concealed roll of her eyes.

"What are you doing here? Thought you were training with a squad of powered armor in Russia or something like that? Nice new haircut."

Katya smiled and ran a hand through her short spiky cut and then motioned towards the room beyond Julie.

"Let me come in, give me a beer, and I'll tell you what I've been up to?"

Sergeant Mathison was a confused man. He, and every other off-duty Marine, and a good chunk of those who were on duty but not actively on patrol, had been summoned to the large auditorium on the new base. It was nearly nine at night, and a Sunday night at that, and it was more than a bit of an odd time to have an assembly.

With a half suppressed yawn, he made his way down the rows of seats until he spotted a familiar face.

"Evening, Lieutenant, what's going on?"

"Damn'd if I know. Take a seat, Frank."

Frank Mathison nodded and took a seat next to Lieutenant Shiperilli, a blunt short woman built like a tank. She was a good one, he had decided a long time ago, and he was rather happy to have her in charge of his section.

"Some big brass thing?"

The Lieutenant just shrugged her answer as her gray eyes took in the packed auditorium around her. There were several hundred Marines assigned to protect the new Guardian Training base, still called Plattsburgh Air Force Base. Nearly all of who were in this auditorium. Something about this was seriously starting to feel wrong to her, and she took a closer look at all the people gathered.

"Hey, Frank, you notice that its only the Marines here? Hell, even the rapid reaction team is here, I don't see the Major anywhere. Where's the Sergeant Major?"

"Sergeant Major Torsson is on Mars last I knew, Ma'am. Helping out with the problem they had over there."

The Lieutenant nodded at that, at least that explained the Sergeant Major's absence.

"Odd time to call a meeting."

"Yes, Ma'am, it is."

The two of them took a look at each other, and then both frowned. Something was definitely not right.

"Sergeant, take a few guys and go see what's going on."

The Sergeant was moving before she finished speaking and she smiled. He was a good one, and he did a good job keeping order and following her commands. He took three other Marines with him, and headed out the doors to find out what was going on.

Five minutes later, just when she was starting to get worried about what was taking the Sergeant, all of the four main doors into the Auditorium swung open at once. Large black packs were tossed inside, and the doors were slammed shut.

The Lieutenant was on her feet and moving, along with most of the other Marines before the first of the packs came to a stop. They didn't know what was going on, but this couldn't be good. If this is the Major's idea of some sort of stupid test, he's going to have some very angry Marines on his hands.

She hit the door a second after another Marine, and nothing happened. Whatever was on the other side of the doors, it was heavy and it had the doors good and blocked. She could hear soft hissing sound now, and she spared a glance behind her to where the four bundles were releasing a green colored gas.

Lieutenant Shiperilli knew that color, and what it meant. The nerve toxin it represented, called T-33, and was one of those things that most Tiri wished they could un-invent. It also made the human nerve toxin, Serine gas, look like a bad smell. Desperately she turned back, and with the others, began trying to force the doors open.

Outside, the doors had been blocked by the simple means of backing a military transport truck against each of the doors. The metal fire doors bent, as the screaming inside started, and more and more Marines tried to force the doors open. The gas spread quickly, and its effects were as quick as they were savage.

A little over two minutes after the packages had been tossed into the auditorium, it was deathly silent, and no one tried to force the doors open anymore.

In a nearby parking lot, well away from the neural toxin, just in case some of it managed to leak out of the building, a group of men and women silently waited. When the noise inside of the auditorium had ceased and no more movement was heard within, they piled into the waiting cars. All of them except for the two who had been in the two sets of powered armor waiting patiently nearby to pick off anyone who managed to find a way out of the building. Four Marines, who had chosen the wrong time to come snooping outside, had been silently and rather efficiently dispatched by dart pistols by the waiting figures.

The cars headed towards the old base, and the true objective of the assault while the two powered armor suits began their search for the perimeter Marine guards, which there had been no way of getting rid of in the trap.

The cars passed through the guard station, waved on by one of their number who had taken over the station only brief minutes before. This plan had been put together months ago, when the training location for the Guardians had been found out. Now it was being put into action. If they could kill these Guardian Trainees, they would strike a fatal blow to the Tiri forces.

Soon, the first of the cars was heading towards the Oval, and the houses around it in which the trainees were housed.

Chapter Seventeen

"How long are you here for?"

Julie and God were sitting on the porch of the red-bricked house, enjoying the nice summer evening. A wooden slat table sat between them, perched upon which were the two beers that they had been drinking. It was a warm night, and Julie picked up her beer just to trace the condensation on the outside of the bottle as she they talked. She liked Katya. The sniper scared her, but after Australia, it was good to know that God was on their side.

"My Sword of troops should be here soon enough. We were doing low G training on the Moon and I got an early shuttle back here to see what you were up to."

Katya smiled and pointed towards the two-meter long, silver, hard case resting on the deck next to her.

"Besides, I had to pick up my new baby."

Julie looked over in confusion at the sniper's words.

"What do you mean, Sword?"

The sniper smirked back at her and slouched a bit further in her chair, taking a healthy swig of her beer before answering.

"You haven't heard yet? We've been having the devil's own time trying to integrate all of these different armed forces personnel. Everybody wants us to use their own organizational structures. Anyway, it was getting bad enough that Guardian Command got involved, and I understand that Emie called together most of the senior level commanders and told them exactly what she thought of this nonsense. So, now, its been decided that it'll just be easier to use the Tiri organization structures."

That hadn't been something that Julie had heard about, and she took a sip of her own beer before asking, her attention on the fireflies that were dancing about in the center of the oval.

"What sort of structure?"

Katya laughed, and then emptied her bottle.

"They really have this whole Knight thing going on, you do realize that right? Honor, Wisdom, and Strength as their motto for the Guardians, and they take that deadly serious. Anyway, like I was saying, we've adopted the original Tiri organization. One Dagger is composed of ten personnel. One Sword, has ten Daggers, and a Lance, is made up of ten Swords."

It made a sort of sense to her, but Katya was glad she was going to be dealing with Fleet personnel more than Marines. She'd almost literally grown up with the concept of a squad, company, and battalion, and learning a new one was just going to be weird. Julie glanced at the sniper next to her, and then down at her own Guardian Trainee's uniform. Well, just a different kind of weird than her life normally was these days.

"Right, and your baby?"

Katya turned her head and smiled slowly towards her, and Julie was reminded of nothing so much as a wolf that had discovered the joy of hunting prey.

"Take a look at this."

Katya set aside the now empty beer bottle and pulled around the rather heavy looking silver case. Pressing her thumb to the scanner set into the cover, she waited for the lock mechanism to

recognize her thumbprint, and unlock the case. Julie sat up and leaned over to get a look at what was inside as Katya flipped open the lid and waved at the contents with the air of a showman.

"This is the VP-303 Plasma carbine. Range in atmosphere is three kilometers, give or take a few meters depending on air density. It has the stopping power of a Light Antitank Weapon, and is completely man-portable. The power cell is only good for three rounds, unfortunately, which, along with its small overheating problem, is why its not exactly standard equipment."

The sleek, deadly shape in the case could be nothing other than a weapon. Julie bent forward to get a better view and nodded. She'd read about the Plasma Carbine series, but hadn't seen any before. The Sergeant Major had said that not many had been produced, and hadn't been able to secure one for a demonstration for the Trainee's.

"Do I even want to know how you got your hands on this?"

Katya laughed and pulled the heavy weapon from its case, setting up the front mounted bipod and attaching the rather large scope.

"I'm God."

"Uh huh, sure you are. Careful you don't put a hole through anything, God."

Katya just grinned as she took out one of the three power cells, which were in the case, and screwed it into the socket located in the butt of the rifle.

"Here, come take a look at the scope. It has thermal imaging, as well as low light, and times sixty magnification. Like this, that's it. This knob controls magnification, and this switch toggles you between thermal, low light, and regular vision."

Crouching by the railing, her shoulder pressed snug against the impressively large weapon, Julie had to admit that she almost understood God's fascination with big guns. The optics were something else though, and she zoomed in, while engaging the low light, and could pick out details on the New Base, nearly two kilometers away.

"Wow. Nice set up. Does Weston know about your gun obsession?"

Julie grinned in answer to the snort behind her, as she slowly scanned the area on the New Base, enjoying being able to zoom in and out on objects.

"Weston is driving me insane. I swear, the man is petrified of actually showing any feelings. I had to nearly pin him to the wall to get a kiss, do you know that?"

The grin faded as Julie grumbled.

"Yeah, I can believe it. I think it's a family trait. I still haven't gotten a kiss from Emie. I swear, if I don't get to kiss her soon, someone is going to die a very messy death."

Whatever Katya's answer was to her statement, Julie would never find out. She had switched over to thermal enhancement and was looking at the guard post at the edge of the New Base, and the one leading into the Old Base area.

"Hey, Katya, take a look at this?"

Standing up she let the sniper slide into position, and pick up the rifle.

"Take a look at the guard posts, under thermal enhancement. Why are there those red splotches all over the floor of the posts?"

Thinking it had something to do with a quirk in the guns imaging system, or maybe that the posts had some sort of heating system in them that was on for some reason or other in the balmy night. Julie picked up her bottle of beer and emptied the last few mouthfuls as Katya searched for what Julie had seen.

"Oh crap."

"What? Did I break your new toy?"

Julie glanced at the rather impressive looking scope in worry at that. She really didn't want to break any toys that God was fond of.

"I can try and fix it, we learned how to find the problems in unfamiliar equipment during the first training session using our gifts."

"No no, that's not it. Shit, what are you, some sort of trouble magnet? Damn it, that's blood that you saw in those guard posts."

Swiveling slightly, Katya took a look towards the road leading from the New Base into the Old and cursed again. Switching to low light, she zoomed in on the first car, and her lips tightened into a thin line at the armed and armored people she spotted inside.

"I've got some sort of convoy headed this way, and there are armed people inside of those cars. Can you sound the alarm from here and warn people?"

"Yes, but none of us are armed. We were supposed to have side arms, but production is behind."

As she spoke, Julie was moving towards the door, and flung it open, hurrying inside.

"Up! Get up! We've got problems."

She kicked Marcus's foot as she passed the couch, and grabbed the phone. Both Mary and Harry were staring at her as if she had lost her mind, but she didn't have time to explain. Wordlessly she pointed towards the porch as she closed her eyes and focused upon her task. It wasn't particularly difficult, but it was going to require her to be focused. What she was attempting was

not as simple as accessing a computer network directly, instead she focused on the phone signal. Allowing herself to trace it back to its origin, and make the proper connections to access the base's newly upgraded computer systems. Once there, threaded along the tenuous connection of the phone, she activated the base's alarm systems, worried when she spotted only a few Marines on duty through the base sensor net. She did not dare stay where she was; if anything happened to the telephone wires, she would be cut off from her body.

Julie pulled out as soon as she could, and grimaced at the nearly instantaneous headache that was waiting for her as she returned to her own body. Pulling out fast was not the most pleasant of experiences, and even though she was a lot better than she could have ever thought she would be, she felt drained from the experience. There was no time though, and she headed outside as the alarms blared to life all across the base. Massive floodlights, often used while groups were doing training or playing at night on the oval, came to life and lit the area.

All three of her roommates were already outside, clustered around Katya as she followed the convoy onto the Old Base, still not entirely certain of who they were.

"Here they come, they just passed the Old Base guard post, got waved right through by the guy inside. Here comes one of the marine patrols, trying to wave them down. Crap."

There was no mistaking the flashes from across the Oval as explosive darts found their targets. Even without the benefit of the scope, all four of them could see the two Marine guards try to wave down the lead cars and get cut down by fire from inside. The fire continued a second later as two Guardian Trainee's stepped out of their house on the other side of the Oval, and were cut down on the porch.

Mary's eyes were wide, and she was pointing.

"Oh God. That was Janek and Claudia I think."

"Well, that answers my question about if they are the good or the bad guys. Rock and roll."

Flicking off the safety, Katya took careful aim across the oval, which was nearly point blank range for the weapon in her hands.

"Mary and Marcus, go grab everyone you can and get them away from the Oval if you can. Harry, you still have that cellular phone of yours? Good."

Julie paused as God fired her first shot. The plasma carbine was a devastating weapon. The baby brother of the rifle that was mounted over the right shoulder of Powered armor suits, it created a ball of plasma inside of its main chamber, and packaged it into a magnetic containment bottle before hurtling the entire thing out its muzzle. All four of them stared in amazement as the glowing white ball tinged with blue arced across the open Oval and slammed into the first car. The carbine had first been developed as a possible anti-armor system for troops in unpowered armor. Its weight, coupled with the relatively low fire rate, overheating problem, and the fact that it went through power cells like nothing else, had sidelined its development.

On impact, the magnetic bottle ruptured, and the plasma inside exploded. The effect was impressive, to say the least. The shot had hit exactly where God had been aiming, despite the car having been moving, and the center of the car simply disappeared in an all too familiar electric blue cloud of a plasma explosion. Having felt the heat from one of those already, Julie could only hope that the men inside of that car suffered before dying. They had killed at least two Guardian Trainee's, and probably at least a few Marines'.

"Harry, call the command center. Tell them what's going on. Hopefully someone will be alive down there. Mary, Marcus, move it!"

This was, she reflected, probably the first combat any of her housemates had ever been involved in, and her command snapped them out of the surprised shock they were in and got them moving.

Julie crouched down next to God and picked up both of the surprisingly heavy power cells, even as God tracked towards the second car. The convoy had stopped, Julie counted six cars in total, not counting the one in flames now, and people were flinging themselves out of the cars to get under cover. There was a three-second cycle time on the Plasma Carbine, and Julie waited anxiously for that eternity before God let loose her second shot. She blew apart the rear car, which a few of the enemy had been trying to turn around and pull away with, trapping the remaining vehicles between the two flaming wrecks, at least for the moment.

"Come on, we gotta go."

Heaving herself to her feet, Julie was a step behind the sniper, carrying the two spare cells, as they ran off the porch, not a moment too soon as fire riddled the area where they had just been. The explosive darts turning the wooden porch into shredded pieces of debris in mere moments as more and more of the enemy opened fire from their cover at where the sniper had been.

"Sergeant Major, we're starting our decent. North Star sends her compliments, and congratulations on sorting out the evacuation data with Major Sims."

The Sergeant Major looked up from the data pad in his hand and nodded his understanding to the copilot. Turning off the pad, he stuffed it into the duffle strapped down at his feet and glanced around the drop ship that he had caught an early ride back with. Torrson, along with the actual six-man crew of the drop ship, each wore Fleet unpowered armor, which doubled as pressure suits. The rest of the hold was taken up with the ten suits of armor that formed a Dagger of powered armor.

"Lucky you caught a ride back with us, eh?"

The young Sergeant sitting next to his suit of armor grinned over at the Sergeant Major. The man, no kid, couldn't be older than twenty, and the Sergeant Major was dismally certain that he was the oldest man onboard the drop ship. By the Maker, the Sergeant probably wasn't old enough to shave every day, at least not as far as Sergeant Major Torrson was concerned.

"Ya, really lucky."

The young Sergeant continued to grin, apparently missing the sarcasm in the older man's tone as the drop ship hit the edges of the atmosphere and began its descent. Gone were the days of waiting for hours in orbit for a clear window through the human sensor nets, thank the Maker. Hopefully gone, were the days of him going down in shuttles as well. Not that he didn't trust those contraptions, but he felt more than a bit safer taking a drop ship. Now these were true and tested Tiri ships, not like the shuttle that had landed him in the middle of Quebec.

It actually was a stroke of luck that he had managed to catch an early ride back. He wasn't officially due back to PAFB for another day, but he wasn't going to give the recruits that much of a vacation from his presence. Someone needed to make certain they didn't mess up, and learned how to one day, maybe, become Guardians. This Dagger, part of the First Lance, which was a Lance of Jump Troops, was on its way down to PAFB to begin more training groundside after spending time doing low level gravity training on the Moon. There were nine other Daggers, but a SNAFU up at Luna with the drop ships meant only this one Dagger would be making the trip Earth side today. The other nine, after the Fleet dogs got there act together, would be transported tomorrow.

Thankfully he was saved the effort of coming up with some sort of answer for the terribly earnest Sergeant by the copilot once more leaning back out of the cockpit and speaking over the ship's intercom.

"Sir, PAFB just had a general alarm tripped. We're getting some confusing reports about intruders on the base."

That got the Sergeant Major's attention and he scowled.

"How long until we land?"

"Fifteen minutes, Sir."

"Push it to the limit, we need to get down there. Sergeant, get your men ready, I'm going to drop you over the Oval. We'll secure the base from there."

The Sergeant had the reactions of the very young, and was already ordering his men to suit up and perform pre-drop checks, as they plummeted through the atmosphere towards the landing area. The Sergeant Major could hear the worried mutterings of the pilots as they pushed the descent of the drop ship to maximum. They had a right to be worried, pushing the envelope was not a great idea on something this large, and Torrson could tell first-hand how dangerous it could be. Still, if anything happened to the Guardian Trainees, it would be a serious blow to the Fleet's build up.

Emily was stretched out on the small bed that she kept in the back of the second part of her ready room. As predicted, she was having problems sleeping, and had tossed and turned for most of the past three hours. Finally she had managed to slip into a doze-like state, and was fitfully

dreaming. Her dreams, whatever they were, were dark and full of fire and death. When the soft chime of a Com signal broke into her rest, she was almost glad to get up.

By the time the Com signal chimed a second time she was in the room that served as her office and tasting her link with her ship self. There had been the usual amount of communications traffic during the last few hours, a few urgent ones, including one just a moment earlier. Primary systems were all in acceptable levels, as were the secondary and back up systems, hull integrity was good, and sensors had not detected any more fighting on the ground below.

"Yes?"

Suppressing a yawn she glared at the face of her Provost, stopping her impulse to tease him as she recognized the look on Angwar's face.

"What's happened?"

"We've just received an alert that PAFB has intruders, and shots have been fired. We got a scan from a passing shuttle, and there was an explosion near the trainee houses."

Tugging on the jacket top of her uniform she refused to think about the sudden clench of fear that clutched at her gut. If she stopped to think about Julie, she would hesitate, and she didn't dare do that.

"Alert the rapid reaction teams, and get them moving. We'll move into a geo-synchronous orbit over the base, and drop our own Marines. Is there anything closer than us?"

"A drop ship is on descent towards the base with a Dagger of jump troops from Luna. They're ETA is fifteen minutes. Sergeant Major Torrson is onboard and has taken command."

Emily nodded and headed for the armored hatch out to the bridge, which slid open as she approached it. Angwar was at his station, and looked up from the now empty Com screen in front of him, and stood as he spotted her.

"Tell Engineering that we'll be moving. I'll alert the other Guardians that they're on their own as far as keeping an eye on the situation below us goes."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Settling herself into the crash couch, she closed her eyes as she melded more completely with her ship self. Please Julie, don't do anything stupid and keep yourself safe.

"Angwar?"

"Yes, First Guardian?"

"Prep my suit of powered armor."

She craned her neck around the edge of the couch and glared at him, watching the objection die on his lips.

"I'm not going to wait up here to find out what's going on. I'll bring the honor guard, but I'm going down there."

Everyone else on the command deck studiously avoided looking anywhere near her direction, recognizing that tone of voice. Her Provost was a smart man and he gave a small nod as he turned back to his work. He would doubtlessly have her drop last, but she didn't care, as long as she wasn't up here... what was that very accurate human saying, oh yes, twiddling her thumbs. Julie was down there, and she had a lot to say to the other woman, and she was going to be damned if she didn't manage to say it this time without interruptions.

Chapter Eighteen

"That's Major Castigar."

Julie whispered to Katya and let the sniper take back her plasma carbine. The two of them had found cover two houses over from Julie's house, which had been riddled with return fire after the snipers last shot. They had two full power cells left, and one shot remaining from the power cell in the carbine, which gave them seven shots to play with. Against at least two dozen soldiers who were slowly working their way from house to house across the Oval from them. Thank god they had sounded the alarms and at least most of the trainees had gotten out. Although the occasional muffled yell of pain, almost always silenced halfway through, gave testimony to the fact that at least some of the trainees had not acted quickly enough.

"Can we stop them?"

God was grim as she studied the cautious movements across the Oval and the group that were starting to flank around to try and take care of the sniper.

"No, but we can slow them down. When I fire, we'll have to move quickly. Soon as I shoot, we run around behind this house, cross the back lawn, and set up next door for another shot, got it?"

"Got it."

"Crap, Castigar just went around behind one of the houses, I don't have a shot at him. Hmmm.... But these three are a bit too close together. I'll take them out. You ready?"

Julie hefted the two power cells, each of which weighed at least fifteen pounds, and nodded, even though Katya couldn't see her, since the sniper was still studying her intended targets.

"Yes. Do it."

Once again, Julie was glad that God was on their side. Katya's shot arced across the open ground of the Oval, and to the rows of houses on the other side. Three of the intruders were just a bit too

close together, taking cover by a cement wall. The plasma bolt exploded almost perfectly between them, killing two instantly, and riddling the third with shrapnel. The only reason the third was alive at all was due to the unpowered armor that he wore, which had offered some protection at least. He might have been alive, but he wasn't going to be doing anything. A chunk of cement, the size of Julie's hand, had sliced through the back of his calves. Which effectively hamstrung him, crippling him and stranding him where he dropped unless one of the other intruders stopped to help him.

Julie and God didn't see any of it though. The second they had fired, both were up and running back around the house that they had taken up position next to. This time they didn't get away entirely unscathed, for whoever the intruders were, they were not stupid. Four of them had set up positions, scanning the other side of the Oval for the telltale flash of light from the muzzle of the plasma carbine as it fired. The moment they spotted it, they opened fire with the pulse rifles that each had been equipped with, spraying the area where the flash had come from. It was medium range for a pulse rifle and the lawn where they had just been exploded as a dozens of explosive darts hit it. Dirt and bits of lawn sprayed around them as they lunged behind the stone foundation of the house.

Dirt was not the only thing that had sprayed them though, and Katya collapsed as she tried to put weight on her right leg, groaning. Julie was next to her in an instant, worriedly taking in Katya's thigh where a piece of shrapnel had gone straight through her flesh. She was bleeding a lot, so Julie took off the jacket of her uniform, quickly wrapping the entire thing around the wound. Katya gave a small, strangled cry of pain as she tightened the crude pressure bandage around the bleeding wound, trying not to think about the amount of blood that was spurting from that injury.

"We have to move, can you walk if I help you?"

"Don't have any choice, come on, just get me to the next spot, with the carbine."

Using the large weapon as a walking staff, and her arm draped over Julie's shoulder, the two of them lurched towards the firing position that God had picked out for them.

Katya half slid, half collapsed into the spot that she had picked out, along with her weapon, as Julie crouched and began unscrewing the old power cell, to replace it with a new one. Julie swore softly as the floodlights, which had so far illuminated the entire Oval, were targeted and blown out. Assuming that the intruders had low light vision enhancement of some sort, they had just gained a large edge over the trainees still trying to get out of the area.

"Just once, I want to come up against a stupid enemy."

Katya chuckled without humor as she propped up her leg behind her, ignoring the blood, which was seeping out of the crude bandage, pulsing with each beat of her heart. She knew what that meant; the shrapnel had hit an artery, probably her femoral artery, which meant she was in the process of bleeding out.

Pressing the butt of the rifle snug to her shoulder after Julie had finished screwing in the second power cell, God switched the scope to low light mode and hunted for some good targets, even as she spoke.

"Julie, when I take this shot, grab the Carbine, and go down a few houses to take another shot. Keep going as long as you can, you'll have five more shots that you can take."

Julie's eyes narrowed at that. She had already done the leaving a friend behind thing, and she wasn't about to do it again. Not here, not ever if she could help it. She didn't care if Katya was injured, she'd carry the sniper if she had to.

"I don't think so, Katya."

God must have settled on a target, because she became as still as the cement foundation that they were crouched next to; barely breathing as far as Julie could tell. Still, she was breathing enough to whisper harshly.

"That shrapnel cut an artery, Julie. It's only a matter of time before I bleed out now. So leave me here. I'll get their attention, and you blow them away. Got it?"

"Go to hell, God. I'm not leaving you anywhere. What do you think I'd be able to tell Weston? Sorry, but she said leave her behind, so I did?"

That got a bit of a reaction, and Julie was glad to see the edge of Katya's lips curl up in a slight smile.

"Come on, who's going to keep these Windstars in check if you aren't there with me?"

"Fine, but we'll have to move quick. I think I can take out two of those snipers they set up."

The way Katya said the word sniper, showed what she thought of the ones who were trying to hunt her from the other side of the Oval. It wasn't quite a sneer, but it was darn close. Julie grabbed a hold of the back of Katya's shirt and nodded in the sudden darkness, as the last of the floodlights was hit.

"I'm set."

The moment she fired, Julie hauled the sniper upright and backwards, dragging her back around the foundation of the house as another hail of explosive darts chewed up the ground where they had just been. This time though, Katya grabbed Julie's hand before she started to drag her towards the other firing position, having a hard time speaking through the pain from her leg.

"Don't. They sent two men up that way to cut us off, we'll have to go back the way we just came."

Grimly, Julie tightened the make shift bandage around her friend's leg, doing her best to at least slow the blood flow and trying not to think about why her hands were so quickly covered in a warm, wet, sticky fluid. There were, she guessed, some advantages to having to work by little light now. It was, she realized, not as dark as she had first thought. The lights of the nearby city of Plattsburgh, and the quarter moon, gave just enough light to see things in shades of gray and black.

Which was why, when she started to pull God back the way they had come, towards the house she had shared with her roommates, she spotted the hulking form coming up along the fence, behind the houses, towards them.

"Oh Christ, powered armor, Katya."

Katya did her best to roll over and bring up the heavy plasma carbine to aim at the approaching powered armor, but she had lost more blood than either her or Julie realized. She barely managed to get up onto one knee, before collapsing back against the cold cement foundation behind her, the world spinning in front of her eyes.

"I can't. Here, aim for the lower center, the power cells are located on the right side."

Her words sounded slurred, and Julie was worried her friend was going into shock. They had bigger, much bigger, problems at the moment though, and she heaved the heavy carbine upright. Pressing her cheek to the side, she peered through the scope at the suddenly well-seen powered armor suit four houses away from them. The suit was at an angle to her, scanning the area that they had been in. Far behind it, she could see what appeared to be two bodies lying near the fence, and she could only hope they were no one she knew.

This stupid thing must weigh at least twenty kilos, Julie thought as she braced herself and took aim at the bulge on the right side of the suit, which would contain the suit's power cells. It was a weak spot, and one that, if she could hit it, she would have a very good chance of knocking out the suit.

Remembering what she could of her basic training, she took aim and squeezed the trigger of the rifle. The recoil, for someone who had been training on pulse rifles, was surprising, and it kicked her backwards, sending her sprawling on her butt a good four feet from where she had been standing. Unfortunately, the suit chose that very moment to start to turn, and the plasma bolt hit the thing's right arm instead of the power cells. A plasma bolt was designed to punch through armor, and not even a powered armor suit could simply shrug off a direct hit. The bolt blew a nice large hole through the suit's dart Gatling gun, and spun it back around due to sheer momentum.

Cursing, Julie scrambled for the rifle, which had landed a few feet away. Wrenching the thing upright, not bothering to get up off the ground, she aimed it towards the powered armor that was turning around. She had absolutely no doubt that if she did not get it with this shot, that she and God were about to die. Even if the Gatling gun was damaged, the suit's plasma rifle made the

one she was holding look like a little toy gun, not to even mention the grenades it mounted on its back.

She had only one shot at this, and she melded with the gun, adrenalin making everything move in a sort of slow motion. It was with crystal clarity that she saw the suit swing back towards her, its plasma rifle already lowered and charged. The plasma carbine in her hand would not fire for another second, while the barrel cooled, and she knew, without a doubt, that that second would cost them their lives. So, she overrode the lockout, and forced the gun to fire without having completely cooled.

The blast actually forced her butt a few inches deeper into the soft soil, but it fired. Two things happened at the same time. First, the plasma bolt fired, passing through the distance between the carbine and the powered armor in a blink of an eye. The bolt itself hit exactly where Julie had been aiming this time, and the power cells added to the explosion, blasting what was left of the powered armor through the fence to its left. The second thing that happened was that the carbine in Julie's hand went into overload, its innards fusing after the carbine, which were known to have problems with overheating on a good day, was forced to fire shots in quicker succession than it was supposed to.

Julie nearly ripped her mind from the now fused carbine, shoving it away from her as she crawled over towards the unconscious Katya and began dragging her away. In a few seconds the one remaining charge in the Carbine's power cell was going to go, and she didn't intend to be anywhere nearby when it did.

The drop ship was two kilometers in altitude over the Old Base, when the true reason for the ship's name became apparent. The bulky ship, with its prominent weapon turrets, box-like shape, stubby wings and elongated tail, was said to have the aerodynamics of a falling refrigerator. That was, as far as the Sergeant Major was concerned, a bit of an optimistic view. Under each of the ten suits of powered armor, was a hatch which would retract and, quite literally, drop the suits out of the ship when they were over the LZ.

Which was part of the reason that the crew of each drop ship, and any passengers, which was what the Sergeant Major was without his powered armor suit, wore Fleet armor or pressure suits, since the entire insides of the craft had to be depressurized before the drop. The other small problem with drop ships, was the fact that when the jump troops were dropped, the antigravity drives could not be used, for fear of turning the troops and their armor into mangled piles of scrap if they passed under the antigravity drives. Since no pilot in his sane mind wanted to stay over a hostile landing zone any longer than he had to, drop ships came down over an LZ as hard and as fast as they could, plasma engines cranked to the safety limit, and the troops were dropped as the craft passed over the intended drop zone.

Sergeant Major Torsson made bloody well sure his crash harness was tight when the red warning lights came on in the drop bay. Decompression at the speeds that the drop ship was going was not exactly a pleasant experience. The crew of the ship, fleet runts all of them, chuckled at the grunt that they managed to get out of the Sergeant Major as the cabin pressure dropped, and then

the hatches under each of the jump troops opened. A moment later, each of the ten troops disappeared as they dropped.

The drop ship commenced a nice large loop back around towards the landing zone to provide air support for the jump troops after they had landed. Torsson had been through combat drops enough times to know what was happening below him. The ten suits would be dropping a kilometer straight down in free fall; each of the Marines in those suits would be praying that the small disposable antigravity drives would work when they needed them. Just a bit over a kilometer above the ground that would be rushing up to meet them, each marine would swivel in the air to align the heavy packs that they wore towards the ground in a move that was trained into them, and activate the disposable antigravity pack. It would kick like a mule, and Torsson knew that no matter how good the training, some would manage to bang their head or bite their lips on the way down.

"Sir, we just got a sensor reading off of what looks to be plasma carbine fire down there. Looks like whoever's shooting overrode the safeties somehow... I just got a reading of what looks awfully like an overload explosion."

"Make sure the Dagger know what they might be facing. And get me a channel to wherever Lady Windstar is."

Still, he found himself wishing to be down there with them when they hit, probably under fire, if not the moment they landed, soon after they did. With a curse, he flipped on the Com system, knowing that he wasn't the only one who wanted to be down on that ground.

"Torsson, you make damn sure that no one starts shooting up the Guardian Trainee's you get that?"

Emily was strapping herself into her power armor, yelling into the Com unit that was being held up to her by a rather helpful ensign. Shoving her arm down into the right arm of the suit, she double-checked the Gatling guns servos as she kept an eye on the slightly fuzzy transmission from the Sergeant Major.

"Yes, Ma'am. We're commencing our swing back around to provide air support. They all have strict orders not to fire on anyone whom they can't ID."

"They better not, Torsson, or I'll make certain none of them set foot inside of a set of powered armor again. We're going to drop in..."

She glanced towards the cockpit, and the organized chaos around her, measuring the progress of the pre-launch checks going on throughout the ship with a practiced eye.

"Five minutes or so. Twenty minute descent, so we'll be your back up in just over twenty-five minutes. Make sure that Dagger knows they're going to have troops jumping in on them, I don't want any of them targeting us."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"And, Torsson?"

"Ma'am?"

"Keep an eye on Julie for me until I get there?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

She smiled at the tone of the Sergeant Major's voice, and managed to return his salute before the ensign cut the signal so that she could seal her armor and get on with her own pressure checks. Switching on the Com unit inside of the suit, she switched it over to the Daggers Com channel.

"Lieutenant Lewis, make certain your men know that there will be friendly forces on the ground."

Lewis, one of the recently borrowed humans from the British armed forces, was two suits of armor over from her, doing his own equipment checks. The checks themselves would continue all the way down to the drop zone, keeping the marines occupied on the drop into what could still be a hostile landing zone by the time they got there. The Tiri had perfected the art of the combat drop over the years of conflict with the Bak'ra, and they had passed that knowledge onto the humans training to meet the coming threat.

"Yes, Ma'am."

He didn't sound particularly happy, and she didn't blame him. Five of his regular Dagger jump troops were going to have to stay behind to give up their places for her and her honor guard. She also knew she didn't particularly care if he was happy or not. The lack of drop ships was starting to become pronounced with all the training for the three Lances of Jump Troops, not the mention the fact that they were often used to transport a large amount of regular Marines. Still, there were simply too many things to build, and there was going to be more than one place where they simply had to skimp on equipment.

They were green; no doubts about that. Each unit was composed of soldiers from nearly every country on Earth, and more than a few civilian volunteers. Emily knew that none of the units could even begin to be called a cohesive fighting force yet, but that would come. As strange as it seemed to her, the very fact that each of the units was a mish mash of troops from many nations was actually helping. She had gotten more than one report of Fleet, Air Force, and Marine recruits who simply refused to give up as a matter of national pride. It was, she supposed, something that most Tiri couldn't understand, even after all this time on Earth. There had been a unified Tiri government, the Empire, for the last four generations.

Her drop ship was, as she expected, the last one to drop. The first nine had already dropped a few moments before, and if the drop ship she was in was a bit further back from the others than was customary, she paid no notice. The medical drop ship had even dropped before hers. Emily had

no doubt that Angwar had pulled the two pilots aside, and had a quiet little discussion with them. Her Provost was not a very happy man, and she had simply brushed aside his further objections about her participation in this insanity, as he called it.

Emie did her best to think about anything but Julie injured or dying, laying in a pool of her own blood. Instead, she concentrated on finishing the pre-drop checks on her armor, feeling the gut wrenching fear transform into something else, something she could use to focus. Rage at whoever dared to injure those she cared about in such a way. Whoever was responsible for this, she was going to see him sent to hell on the next express ride.

Julie kept on dragging the limp sniper by her shoulders, as far away as she could from the crater that had once been a plasma carbine. She had no doubt that her little display had attracted nearly all of the attention from across the Oval, and she desperately tried to get Katya towards anything that even vaguely resembled shelter.

She made it as far as the back of the second of the red-bricked houses, when she ran out of room. She was still blinking in an attempt to clear her eyes of the after images from the explosion of the over loaded carbine, as she slumped down against the cool cement foundation. The grass, she noted absently in an oddly detached manner, was a bit long back here, and would have to be mowed soon. It was a surreal moment, her mind straying towards the length of the grass, even as she looked back and forth, seeing the troops closing in on her and the bleeding form next to her.

So this is how it ends, at least God is with me. The thought, for some reason made her smile, and she watched with a sense of near peace as the group of cautiously approaching intruders to her right spotted her and Katya. At least they're a lot more cautious after we blew away a few of them. Julie watched as the two figures in marine unpowered armor raised the pulse rifles to their shoulders, and took aim. Closing her eyes, she awaited the storm of explosive darts that she was certain would be hurtled towards her and her friend any second now. She clearly remembered thinking of Emie's eyes, and the peace she had felt disappeared, to be replaced by a soul deep sorrow. I'm sorry Emie, I wanted to kiss you so badly and tell you how I think I could be falling in love with you.

So it was, with more than a bit of surprise, that when she heard the unmistakable sound of explosive darts hitting their targets, followed by what sounded to be plasma rifle fire, that she realized she wasn't dead. There are, thankfully, few times in anyone's lifetime when you can open your eyes and be truly surprised that you're still alive. The reason she was alive became clear when she looked towards where the intruders had been.

All that was left of them were small, smoking sacks of flesh, spread across the ground near where they had been. Blinking in surprise, she scrambled to her knees, and took a peek around the side of the building, laughing with sheer joy as she spotted the powered armor suits that were landing around the edge of the Oval.

"Katya, we're safe. The cavalry is here, don't you dare die on me now. Come on, stay with me, God. You're not allowed to go away; God can't die, don't you know that?"

By the time Emily landed, having dropped just shortly after the signal had come through that the Sergeant Major's Dagger was on the ground, it was over. She was just in time to watch as the last of the base was secured, and every marine that had been on duty was taken into custody until everyone's identity was sorted out.

The Sergeant Major himself had landed only a few short moments before she touched down. She popped her armor, stepping out of it to meet him near the center of the Oval, next to where the drop ship that he had been in had made a tight landing to support the troops on the ground, grimacing as she did so, having managed to bang the side of her head on the inside of the armor when her antigravity drive kicked on.

"Torsson, how bad is it?"

Winching as she gingerly touched the bruised area, her eyes already scanning the area, which was being lit by the exterior floodlights from the Sergeant Major's drop ship.

"Ten dead trainees so far, and another fifteen wounded. The worst are being loaded into the medical drop ship and being lifted to Longbow for treatment. God just got sent off also, she had a pretty bad wound and lost a lot of blood."

At her narrowed eyes, the Sergeant Major quickly continued.

"The medics say she should be alright, but they needed to get her to Longbow. I understand that Prince Windstar is already on his way there to meet her."

That got a slight nod and she returned to scanning the edge of the Oval, finally spotting the familiar red head that she had been searching for. She only realized she had begun to jog towards Julie when she noticed that the Sergeant Major, and her Honor Guard, were keeping pace with her as she jogged.

"You and Major Sims round up everyone who even set foot on Karsina colony just before the evacuation. Screen them and then screen them again. I don't want this to ever happen again, you understand that, Torsson?"

"Yes, First Guardian."

She barely heard his answer; for Julie had spotted her and was waiting for her, with a half shocked smile near where the medics were checking out the last of the trainees.

"Hey."

With that little smile and the half wave she gave, Emily knew that she wasn't hurt; maybe a bit shocked, but she wasn't bleeding to death somewhere. Not caring that there was over a hundred Jump Troops crawling around the place, she reached the younger woman, pulled her into her arms and lifted her feet off the ground with the force of her hug.

"I thought you were going to stay out of trouble for a bit after Mars Base?"

Emily smiled as Julie clutched her and let out a strangled half laugh, half sob.

"I seem to have a talent, don't I?"

"We both do."

She lowered her voice, even as she slowly set Julie back down; not letting go of her face, but pulling back just enough so that she could see those brilliant green eyes. Which were looking back at her with a mixture of shock, desire, and something that Emily wasn't quite ready to name yet.

"I was worried I wouldn't get to tell you that..."

Emily trailed off, not certain what she wanted to say, but knowing she wanted to say something, anything. Her heart was beating so hard in her chest she was afraid she was going to pass out, and when Julie smiled in understanding and placed a finger on her lips, Emily couldn't resist the urge to kiss the perfectly shaped finger.

"I know, I was worried I wouldn't either."

And then there was nothing but each other, and the world around them didn't exist. She had wanted this for so long, that when their lips touched, Emily's knees nearly gave out from the sudden pleasure. The mouth under hers was yielding, warm, and so impossibly soft and sweet. With a groan, she went back for another, and another, not caring that her Honor Guard, still in their powered armor, were only a brief step away, and not noticing that they had formed a semi-circle around the two to give them at least some privacy.

Pulling away from those lips was the hardest thing she had ever done, and when Julie's tongue brushed across her lips as she did, Emily nearly picked her up and carried her away to ravish her right then and there. Still, she was First Guardian, and there were things to take care of. That and Julie was in shock, even if she didn't realize it yet. She had her kiss, and she was happy. The fact that there was the possibility of many more kisses to come made her even happier.

"Come on, you been checked out by the medics?"

Green eyes shown up at her, and Emily found herself smiling like an idiot, as Julie shook her head.

"No, they said you were on the way down, and I wanted to meet you before they did a check up on me."

"Let's get you checked out then, and we can see about settling things around here. Then we go take a long walk?"

Julie smiled and looked slightly surprised when the First Guardian took her hand and tugged her along with her towards where the medics were set up. She released Julie's hand once they had stepped out from between the Honor Guard, whom Emily made a mental note to be nicer to in thanks for the moment they had given her and Julie. Quietly, as they headed for the medics, Emily making certain that she was next to Julie incase the red head stumbled, she did her best to explain, having seen the surprise in Julie's eyes.

"We've had a long time to get over certain prejudices that humans still have, such as same sex relationships. No Tiri is going to care that we're umm... whatever we are, as long as it doesn't interfere with the command structure."

Julie nodded slowly, digesting that bit of news as a medic approached. Glancing towards her friend, she smiled hesitantly.

"It's going to be a bit harder for me, but can you stay with me while I get checked out?"

Emily nodded, already having known that her friend had grown up in a culture which didn't totally accept the relationship that they were developing; especially the armed forces.

"Of course."

"How are your roommates?"

Following Julie, and glaring at the medic who tried to stop her, Emily did her best to distract her friend while the doctors checked her out. Judging by the grateful look from green eyes that she got in return, Julie liked to be poked and prodded just as much as Emily did.

"Harry got a bit of a shrapnel wound, and they're taking him to Longbow. Marcus and Mary are both fine, although Mary had a close call."

She paused as the doctor came over to check the scans that the young medic had preformed, and pronounced Julie in one piece. Warning her to seek medical attention if she had any problems in the near future, no matter how small they might seem to her. Emily took her friends hand once more, ignoring the raised eyebrow from the medic, and led her outside.

"Come on, let's get you out of here."

"How is she doing?"

Emily shrugged as she leaned back in her chair, fiddling with a data pad that had been on her desk.

"Sleeping. Training's been postponed for two days, while we sort out the security issues and such. How is God doing?"

Weston grinned at her from the communications console on the top of the desk. For once, she was using her actual quarters, two decks below where the command deck was located, near the center of the ship. The quarters were the most spacious onboard, and had to be since a Guardian would spend most of his or her life onboard their ship self. Her quarters were actually a suite of three rooms. The first was an office, where she had a larger desk, and several seats, along with a modified bookcase with actual Tiri books in it. To one side of the office was a dining and kitchen area that was large enough for her to host dinner parties for the senior officers, when needed. On the other side of her office, were her sleeping quarters and a surprisingly spacious bathroom. There were, she mused, a few perks to being a Guardian. One of which was you got some of the best accommodations in the fleet.

"She'll be alright, they said she lost a lot of blood and had to transfuse her a few times on the way over here. She should be up and about by tomorrow, and back on active duty by the end of the week."

Emily spun the pad on the desktop as she considered her older brother's words.

"You like her a lot don't you?"

The pause between her question and his answer was all she needed, and she lifted her eyes from spinning the pad to grin at Weston. Who scowled back at her and pointed a finger towards her.

"You like Julie a lot don't you?"

Emily scowled right back at them, and the two siblings glared at each other. Which lasted only a few moments before the corners of their lips turned upwards.

"We are in so much trouble. These human women are bad for our bachelor status."

Emily laughed and shook her head.

"Sorry, Weston, I don't think we have much of a choice about it."

Weston's soft snort carried well through the Com system, and Emily grinned back at him.

"What have you found out about these infiltrators?"

That question wiped the grin from her face and she sat up a bit straighter in her chair.

"You and father will get my official report come tomorrow morning. So far though, looks like the Bak'ra managed to insert infiltrators onto the surface of Karsina before we cleared the colony and evacuated. They had a neural net of sorts woven into their skin, which allowed them to fool the standard questioning systems. It seems that they somehow managed to forge medical checks, at least until one of them was re-certified as a doctor and was able to do the check ups for all of them."

Emily leaned forwards, frowning.

"We got lucky, Weston, it could have been a lot worse. Ten trainees dead; ten dead Guardians just like that. They were behind the attempt to blow Mars Base also, as well as that incident out at the shipyards, which Darrien handled. So far, we have about thirty confirmed Bak'ra infiltrators, and I suspect we'll find a few more after we're done screening anyone who was at Karsina. Until then, we'll make certain to tighten security as much as we can. How are things on the diplomatic front?"

Weston shrugged at that, casting a glance over his shoulder towards the hospital bed behind him, where Emily could see a sleeping Katya.

"Father and I managed to hold things together through the Pakistan/India conflict, and even got a bit more control over international matters. The UN is finally noticing that we're planning on putting them out of business, and Father is going to have a long talk with the UN Secretary General tomorrow. You would not believe how shaky things got for a while, and the US is still causing all sorts of problems. I think I'll be having a meeting with their president in two days or so. Don't forget the military reviews scheduled for three months from now."

Emily snorted, she wasn't about to forget that most of the major heads of state, along with the Emperor, and a good chunk of the surviving senate members would be touring the progress that the Tiri had made so far.

"Don't worry, I won't. I think I hear movement in the other room. I'll talk to you later, Weston. Give our best to Katya when she wakes up."

"Give my best to Julie. Take care, Emie."

With a fond smile, she nodded and shut off the Com system, rising and heading towards the bedroom. She dimmed the lights as she went, since she was due for a rest herself. Letting the doors slide shut behind her, she paused by the door to watch Julie in the dim lighting. The trainee had flat out refused to stay in guest quarters, much to Emily's delight, and had promptly crashed once Emily had pointed her towards the bed. Now she enjoyed a moment of being able to study her friend without being seen. Even in the dim lighting, she was able to admire the graceful curves of her friend.

Emie's appraisal was cut short when her friend twisted in the bed sheets, frowning as she whimpered. That must have been the noise she had heard in the other room, and Emily moved without thinking. Nightmares were no stranger to any of the survivors of the Evacuation, that was even more true for the handful of Guardians who still, in their hearts, believed that they had failed their people. It was a rare night indeed when she did not awake without having dreamed of the countless number of her fellow people she had not been able to save.

So it was that she knew exactly what her friend was going through, as she slipped into the bed next to her and slid her arms around Julie's small frame. The months of training had firmed the figure, which Emily soothed, but it was as warm and soft as she had dreamed. As soon as Emily's

arms went around her, Julie twisted around until she was facing Emily and curled up close to the First Guardian; the tension in her frame ebbing away, along with the tension in her face, and Emily smiled in the near darkness as Julie slipped into a more restful sleep.

Tenderly, the First Guardian kissed the forehead of the woman who was coming to mean so much to her, and closed her own eyes. Together they slept, and for a time they each shielded the other from the demons that lurked in their minds, taking comfort from each other's presence.

Chapter Nineteen

Julie woke up slowly, lying on her side in an unfamiliar bed. She took her time, luxuriating in the feeling of the warm body pressed up against her back, the arm possessively wrapped around her waist, the leg entwined between both of hers. It was, she reflected as she slowly let consciousness return, a wonderful way to wake up. The Tiri, it seemed, had a slightly higher body temperature than most humans. Which meant that Julie had her own personal heater. They also, for some reason known only to them, seemed to prefer to lower the temperature in the room that they slept in. As far as Julie was concerned, that worked out fine since she had most of the blankets and a nice, warm body pressed up against her back to keep her warm.

With a yawn, she slowly stretched out her arms and grinned as Emie's hold on her tightened slightly.

"Mornin'."

Julie nearly purred in reaction to the warm breath, which played over her ear as Emily spoke. Twisting around, she cuddled closer to the source of warmth and smiled, enjoying the half-asleep/half-awake stage. Times when she could wake up slowly were few and far between, and she relished those mornings when she could luxuriate in waking up without an alarm.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and grinned at the light-blue silk shirt just a few inches in front of her nose. It was strange waking up next to someone, and surprisingly intimate. Refusing to let her thoughts stray from the pleasant warmth and scent of the woman curled up with her, she leaned forward slightly and nuzzled Emie's neck, grinning as that got an answering rumbled purr from the First Guardian.

"How are you feeling this morning?"

Tentatively Julie stretched, pleasantly surprised when her limbs felt stiff, instead of the pulled muscles she had been expecting. Her head, on the other hand, was a different story, and she winced at the headache.

"I have a headache, but otherwise alright. You?"

Julie reclaimed her spot, head leaning against the front of Emily's silk shirt, and smiled as she could hear the First Guardian's voice rumble through her chest when she answered.

"I slept better than I have in a long time. We can stop by the medical bay after breakfast and get you something for the headache. You sure you're alright after yesterday?"

Julie sighed as Emily's hands began a leisurely massage of her back, and her eyes slipped closed of their own volition. It was hard enough to concentrate with her senses filled with the scent, touch, and feel of Emily, and the back rub wasn't helping her focus on what had happened yesterday at all. What it was making her focus on was the pleasant warmth of their shared body heat, the way the silk-covered guardian felt where they touched. The pain in her head dimmed to where she was able to ignore it.

"Hmmm... yes, I'll be ok. It was just a bit of a shock... oh yes, right there. Umm, you're good at that. Is Katya going to be alright?"

"Right here? Yes, Katya is going to be fine. They had to do a few blood transfusions, but other than that, she's fine. Weston was with her last night when I gave a call. The doctors expect her to be out of bed after a few tests tomorrow, and back on duty in a couple of days. Don't worry about God, she's in good hands back at Longbow."

Julie nodded her head, glad that Katya was going to be back on her feet soon. She'd been worried when her friend had gotten so pale, her lips turning blue from the loss of blood. Emily's message continued for a few minutes, until the Guardian slowly began just stroking her back, and Julie was more content than she ever thought she could be. There was no where else she wanted to be than to be held in Emily's arms, listening to her friend's breathing, and enjoying the way they fit together. *Of course, her mind supplied, it would be oh so much better if we were both naked, and we were pressed together skin to skin.*

"What are you chuckling about?"

Oops, busted. Julie shook her head, not about to talk about that yet. They were attracted to each other, that was pretty clear. She'd had her share of one-night stands during her time with Majestic. Long-term relationships were pretty much out of the question. The Major must have known what she was up to, everyone in Majestic was under one form of surveillance or another, but he pretty much didn't care as long as she did her job. This was different. She didn't want this to turn out to be just another roll in the hay, and that scared her more than she could have thought.

"Just thinking."

"Oh, about what?"

"Us."

Julie toyed with a button on Emily's shirt, enjoying the feel of the blue, silk shirt under her fingertips. It took her a moment to realize that Emily's hands had stopped their slow rubbing of her back.

"We're funny?"

Julie did her best to resist laughing at the nearly pouting tone in her friend's voice, but a glance up at the comical pout on Emie's face did her in and she laughed. Burying her face in the silk shirt she shook her head.

"Sometimes. This isn't going to be easy you know."

Julie grinned as she heard the Guardian's chuckle, and long arms wrapped around her, holding her tight.

"That's a bit of an understatement. Especially considering you're not done with your training. It's going to be a while before I get to see you again I'm afraid. At least I have a teaching stint at the PAFB two weeks from now for a month.

Julie sighed, thinking of those two weeks, and then the doubtless long time after that, in which she wouldn't get to see Emie. The sooner they kicked the Bak'ra's butts out of the system the better, as far as she was concerned.

"Is this going to cause problems? You and me, I mean?"

Emily pulled back at that, freeing a hand, and using it to tip up Julie's face so that Julie could see the solemn expression on her face.

"As long as it doesn't interfere with our duties, no. Guardians are cut a lot of slack in the way of personal relationships. After the miner's revolt, by Imperial decree, a Guardian is afforded the same rights as Imperial Citizens, even though their ship self is officially owned by the Emperor."

Some of the tension eased from Julie's body at Emie's words and she relaxed back into the loose embrace, enjoying the closeness.

"Emie, there's something I wanted to ask you about your family."

Her friend's hand started stroking her back once more and Julie smiled against the silk shirt as she closed her eyes. She knew that both of them would have to move sometime soon, but until she had to, she was going to enjoy every second of this.

"Hm?"

"I met your father, and your brother, but what about your mother?"

Emily's hands stilled and Julie felt her friend stiffen slightly. Cursing herself for bringing up what was probably a touchy subject, Julie carefully pulled back enough so that she could once again see the Guardian's face, and reached up to cup her cheek as she spotted the old sadness in those blue eyes.

"Hey, I'm sorry, you don't have to tell me. I was just curious, I haven't heard much about her."

Emily smiled sadly and kissed the palm of the hand that was cupping her cheek.

"Don't worry, you just caught me by surprise. She was a Guardian, and my father loved her dearly. She died a year after I was born, trying to evacuate an outpost in a system whose sun was going Nova. I only remember her from holo-pictures I've seen."

Julie knew that kind of sadness intimately, and she raised herself up enough to kiss Emie lightly on the lips, hoping to chase away the sadness in her friend's eyes.

"What about your family?"

The only reason Julie didn't flinch, was because she had been expecting the question.

"I was in fifth grade, my parents got into a car accident. The roads were icy, and my father hit a patch of black ice on the way to pick me up from a school play. He died on impact, but my mother lived for two days in a coma, before her body gave up. I remember waiting for them, when all the other kids went home, thinking how mad I was going to be when they showed up, after they couldn't even come to the play."

She remembered that day. Her class had put on a play with the fourth graders, and she had so much fun dressing up like one of Robin Hood's merry men. The teacher, a nice, buxom old nun, had stayed with her when her parents hadn't shown up. She'd stayed with her even when the police showed up.

It was only when she felt Emie's arms tighten around her, drawing her back into a hug, that she realized she had fallen silent.

"What happened?"

The First Guardian's voice was soothing and she closed her eyes, snuggling deeper into the embrace before answering.

"I ended up bouncing around the state system for a while. Then Major Sims, he was a Lieutenant back then, found me during one of my little so-called epileptic fits. He figured out what was going on, and I've been helping Majestic since then."

"I'm sorry, when the gift first starts to become apparent, it's usually a bit traumatic for the child. I wish I had been there to help you."

"You're doing a pretty good job of keeping me out of trouble so far."

Emily snorted at that.

"You do seem to attract trouble, don't you?"

Julie grinned and nodded slightly, relishing the comfort she was enjoying.

"The Major always said I had a talent for stumbling into things."

"No more stumbling, at least while you're a trainee. I don't think I can survive it if you keep on being where the trouble is."

"I promise I'll try, at least for a while."

Emily chuckled at that and Julie smiled as she felt her friend gently kiss her on the forehead.

"As for your Major Sims, I'm detailing him, his counter-part in Red Star, and Sergeant Major Torsson to set up a new intelligence service. I'm rather tired of having surprises pop up on me. We've had problems already with one group of Bak'ra infiltrators, I don't intend to be surprised by another group that might have managed to get into our ranks."

"The Major loves that cloak and dagger stuff, he'll be happy. I think he was sad when the cold war ended and there wasn't any clear enemy anymore. Then he joined Majestic, and he found another mission to dedicate himself to."

"You know General Whittecker?"

Julie nodded. She remembered the tall gray haired general who was the head of Majestic. She had only met him a once or twice, and he had been stiffly formal those few times when she had actually spoken with him.

"Well, he's gone missing."

Julie looked up at that in surprise.

"Missing, what do you mean missing?"

"Missing as in, gone, as in no longer anywhere where anyone can find him. Last he was seen was two months ago it seems. Any idea where he might have gone, or why?"

Julie frowned at that, and shook her head, propping herself up into a sitting position.

"No, I didn't know him very well, just met him a few times. I don't think any of us knew him very well; he was the one who directed where the Majestic teams were sent. He was our funding link; he knew where all the skeletons were buried for everyone on the Senate appropriations committee. Why would he leave now that he actually found out that he was right, aliens existed?"

Emily followed suit, sitting up as well, and Julie sighed, as they no longer were curled up together. It seemed that the real world was bound and determined to make them notice that it still existed.

"I'm not certain, but I think that Major Sims first job is going to be to find Majestics's leader."

Both of them groaned as the com unit in the other room chirped.

"Time for us to get up I suppose?"

Emily shrugged in apology and yawned, as she slowly stood upright.

"Go ahead and use the bathroom, I'm guessing you'll want a shower. I'll get breakfast and find out what's going on down at PAFB. Julie?"

Julie stopped as she headed for the bathroom, turning around as Emily said her name.

"Yes?"

"No more getting yourself into trouble for a while, promise?"

"I already promised I'd try."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"So what's so frickin urgent I couldn't spend a few more days teaching?"

Emily, as Julie had helpfully pointed out, was pissed off, and Weston was more than a little thankful to the Guardian Trainee for sending him a little note this morning and giving him a heads up. She was a remarkable woman, and Weston could understand why his sister would be more than a little irritated at having what little time she got to spend anywhere near the pretty young woman cut short. This time, however, there really was no way around it, and he gestured for her to take a seat. They were in the main meeting room at Longbow base; the fairly large amphitheater was going to be the site of the rather urgent meeting called by the Emperor for most of the senior staff.

"Father called an emergency meeting after a few rather worrisome developments."

Blue eyes narrowed as Emily took the seat her brother had waved towards and folded her hands on top of the table.

"An Emergency meeting? Why? We're on schedule, for the most part, regarding the build up of the fleet and the orbital defenses. We have a shot at stopping the Bak'ra, not a great one, but we'll be at least ready for them."

"It's not a problem on the military front, well, at least not yet. Father had a few questions about the new ship designs that Birk put together, but mostly he's worried about some of the recent attempts by international companies to get rights to Tiri technology and the re-gen centers."

Weston watched as his sister took that in and nodded in understanding. He often had thought that they had both been born in exactly the right order. As much as he could appreciate the ordered life of the military, his mind simply did not work that way. His strengths lay, as their father's did, in the war of diplomacy. It was a war that his sister was uniquely unsuited for, with her tactical way of thinking through most problems. It was, he suspected, a relief to both of them that he was the first-born child, and that she was the First Guardian.

"I just wanted to warn you before the others began to arrive, and give you a chance to get ready to answer some questions about the new ship designs. I know Birk put them together with the help of the humans, and that he fully supports them, but this is a bit of a radical departure from the standard Guardian-class ship design."

His sister stood at that and moved towards the serving table, pouring herself a cup of coffee. Coffee had quite nearly become an addictive drug to quite a few Tiri, who found the dark drink delicious. Weston was not among those numbers, and still preferred a glass of human wine to what he referred to as boiled tar. His father, on the other hand, had discovered the English habit of having tea.

"As First Guardian I shall answer any questions put to me by the Emperor, you know that, Weston. I wouldn't have signed off on the ship designs if I didn't think they had a good chance of working."

"Don't shoot the messenger, Emie. How is the training going?"

He watched her as she gathered a small plate of food from the table, not having had a chance to grab lunch before catching a shuttle to Longbow.

"As well as we can expect, considering we're condensing a training program that should take ten years into two. We're down to a hundred and fifteen gifted trainees, and it's almost the end of the second training cycle. I don't think we'll lose anymore of them. Ten dead from the Bak'ra attack though, that's a serious blow to our force build up. Good salad."

Weston chuckled at that, leaning back in his chair and taking a sip of his own coffee as he considered his sister's words.

"What sort of odds do you give us, really?"

Emily slowly finished the bite she was chewing on, and considered what they were going to face.

"Really? Maybe a hundred to one, I don't know, it depends how far we go in the next few years before the Bak'ra find us, or one of the other planets."

"Anything new on their advance?"

Emily shrugged, taking another bite of salad, chewing it and swallowing before answering his question. Weston couldn't avoid grinning at the table manners that seemed to have been successfully engrained in both him and his sister, despite their best efforts to avoid it.

"No, not since the sensor station in system RFZ-1005. We don't have any more sensor platforms between there and a system halfway between here and Tiri Prime. If we're lucky, we won't hear anything for another year or so."

"And Julie? How is she doing?"

"She's shaken up, that's to be expected after what happened. I've tripled security at all the bases, and I've ordered a full security review, along with medical scans of every Tiri who survived the Evacuation. We can't be certain that those were the only Bak'ra infiltrators."

An emergency meeting was not what Emily had planned for tonight. Tonight was Julie's night off, and the First Guardian had been planning to take her friend out to dinner at this cute, little restaurant not far from the base. Those plans had died a quick death when she got the summons from the Emperor. Her month of teaching was going to be over soon, and she had only managed to see Julie alone once or twice since she had started teaching Advanced Tactics to the remaining Guardian Trainees. Life was just not fair, and Emily had to resist the sudden urge to pout as she took her seat at the meeting table.

She was not the only one who had been called from their duties to attend this meeting. There were, all told, thirty people seated at the table itself. Added to that, were several hundred representatives from nearly every nation on Earth, who sat in the auditorium-like seating surrounding the table. They would be allowed to listen to the discussion, but for the sake of expediency, would not be allowed to ask questions. They were here for the sole purpose of keeping their individual governments apprised of the situation, and they knew it. Since no senate had yet been elected, the thirty heads of departments and services that sat around that table were, for all intents and purposes, the Tiri government. Each of them had sworn allegiance to the Empire, except for Julie, who, as a Guardian, swore her allegiance directly to the Emperor himself.

Meetings were still held in person; it was just far too easy for an electronic version of a person to be formed, and used. Secure channels and authorization codes went a long ways towards making certain that sort of thing did not happen, but all meetings which needed to be secure were conducted in person.

Since it had been called as an Emergency meeting, her father dispensed with the usual pomp and ceremony, and called the meeting to order by raising his hand, and waiting for the table, and then the auditorium, to still. Microphones, hidden in the wooden tabletop, picked up his words so that the rest of the auditorium could hear him.

Emily watched carefully as her father commanded the attention of those around him. He looked, if possible, older than the last time she had seen him at Mars Base. The stress of what he was attempting to accomplish was eating away at him, and for a moment there, he had seemed a tired,

frail old man, an image that frightened Emie. That moment had passed though, and the blue eyes which met her own were as alive as ever, and that slight grin of his let her know that things could not be all that bad, at least not yet.

"As you all know, I have called an Emergency meeting of the Interim Council to discuss several disturbing reports which have recently been brought to my attention. Since we are all gathered here though, I first will ask the First Guardian to give a brief overview of the changes which have been made to the Guardian-class ship designs, and why they were made."

"Thank you, Sire. As most of you know, I am Lady Emily Windstar, First Guardian. Here you will see the basic design specifications for the latest Guardian-class ships. This data, of course, is to be considered top secret, and the usual Imperial consequences apply to any who distribute this information without Guardian Command's prior authorization."

She nodded towards where her Provost was sitting in the bottom row of the auditorium seating, and waited as he activated the holo-tank. A schematic representation of the five-kilometer long Guardian-class ships appeared over the central table, and she used a laser pointer to designate the items as she spoke of them.

"Here you see the current Guardian-class design, officially called the Type-Thirteen Variant. All Guardians who survived the evacuation from Tiri space are of this variant, although that is more a matter of chance than anything else. At any one time, there are usually up to three or four variant generations in service. All capital ships utilize a gravitic drive system for movement in normal space, which can be augmented by plasma thrusters, similar to the engines utilized on our smaller craft."

She took a moment to highlight portions near the front and the rear of the massive ship.

"Here and here are the main gravitic drive systems in the Type-Thirteen Variant. The system works by forming a gravity "wave" before and behind the ship, a few kilometers from the ship itself. These waves basically push and pull the ship through space, eliminating the need for bulky propellant, which was one of the major hurdles, which the American and Russian programs faced whenever attempting to reach another planet. The gravitic drives allow us to also bend what essentially amount to shield bands along the flanks of the vessel, to protect against missiles and energy weapon attacks.

"Now, traditionally, the majority of the weapons emplacements were located along the flanks of the vessel. These include the missile launchers for the warp gate missiles, which are the weapon of choice for long distance engagements. Due to the massive gravitational wave generated ahead of the bow and stern of each ship, nearly all weapons are mounted on the flanks of the ships. A Type-Thirteen Variant Guardian-class ship contains forty missile tubes per broadside, along with twenty-two plasma launchers. This, of course, does not include the defensive weapon emplacements, such as the anti-fighter missile launchers, and particle projection cannons. Added to this, are the bays for the full sword of fighters that each Guardian carries, a hundred fighters in total. As you can all appreciate, the organization of all this along the flanks of the ship means that broadside real estate, as it were, is at a premium.

"This could be alleviated by lengthening the ship even further, however, it has been found over the centuries, that five kilometers is about the maximum that we can manage with our technology. Longer than that and we start running into problems with forces exerted upon the ships structural design from the gravitic drives. The Warp-Gate drives are located near the center of the ship, along with the command center. Each Guardian ship typically contains three fusion generators, one for backup with two needed to open a warp gate."

Pausing to take a drink, she thumbed the switch on the pointer, and waited a second as the holotank display changed. A new structural diagram appeared, this one with a quite noticeable difference from the previous one. Instead of a long cigar shape with weapons emplacements along the sides and a slight bulge at both ends for the gravitic drives, this one had almost a hammerhead design at its bow.

When the Tiri had first been forced to unveil themselves, they had made the physics and engineering behind most of their basic technology available to the top engineers and theoretical physicists on earth. That had been a mostly public relations move on the part of the Tiri, since they expected it to take several years for the scientists to even begin working their way through the massive amounts of data.

Which was why Birk, and Tiri scientists and engineers had collectively snorted in amusement when said humans had come forward with design suggestions for the next generation of Guardian ships.

Some of those top minds were present in the auditorium at the moment, and Emily smiled as she recognized Birk and his small clump of Tiri and Human engineers near the top row of seats.

"As I understand it, when the humans came forward with design suggestions and the possibility of using Tiri technology in a new way, Tiri scientists and engineers started out by ridiculing them, and ended up by refining them. There is something to be said about taking a fresh look at everything that we do, and since humans have no preconceptions of what can, and cannot, be done, they are doing a great job of forcing us to do just that. What you see before you is the design for the Type-Fourteen Variant Guardian-class ships. You will all immediately notice the major structural changes near the bow of the ship. This hammerhead configuration was made necessary by the inclusion of the very first functional Gravitic Weapon system ever developed. I won't go into the specifics, but I have seen it demonstrated, and although it does not have the range of warp gate missiles, it is extremely effective. The downside is that the front gravitic drive wave cannot be operational when the weapon is used, which of course, decreases the acceleration of the ship for the three minutes it takes for the weapon to charge, and then fire."

Emily grinned as she saw one of the human scientists sitting near Birk do a fist pump action.

"Tests have already been carried out, and the very first variant fourteen class experimental ship will be nearing completion in the shipyards above Mars in the next few months. Once we have done trials of the new weapon systems onboard her, the systems should be perfected and completely installed in the other Guardian ships in time for the bounding of the trainee's. This system will reduce the number of warp gate missile launchers which can be mounted on the

flanks of the ships to thirty tubes per flank, and the plasma launchers to eighteen per flank, despite the increased space afforded by the hammerhead design. That is all, Sire."

The holo tank switched off and she hazarded a glance at the faces around the table, finding most of them a tad doubtful. She didn't blame them; it was a rather radical departure from what had become traditional designs. The one thing about the lengthened lifespan, it tended to alter perception of time, years no longer seemed long, and she feared that it might have affected some of the rapid ingenuity that these humans showed. Or, perhaps, that was just one of the many subtle differences which separated the Tiri and human kind.

"Thank you, First Guardian. We do not have time for questions now, but I am positive that you will get some later. Now that we have that explained, I shall bring forward the main reason for this meeting. Yesterday, I was informed that several major international companies were going to attempt to get patents issued for Tiri technology. It appears that the oil companies, along with the pharmaceutical companies, are quite worried about what our technology will do to their financial security. It seems that they have been planning to attempt to get patents on nearly every piece of basic Tiri technology. They intend to attempt to force us to shut down the re-gen centers and build their own, which they will charge for use of, of course."

The table nearly exploded with outrage at that. Basic technology, such as the regeneration centers, was considered to be the property of everyone. All of the Tiri, Emily was amused to see, had begun to consider humans one of them. She grinned as she spotted the same amused expression on her father and brother's face. The Emperor allowed the outraged conversations to continue on for a little while before raising his hand. Conversations ground to a near instant halt at that and everyone at the table turned to pay attention once more to their Emperor.

"Lord Alderson, you are the senior surviving member of the judicial branch of the Tiri government. You were charged with setting up the Imperial judicial system when the time came, and I am pleased to find that you have done well with what time you have had so far. Can we stop them from doing this?"

Lord Alderson was a hawk-faced man that Emie had had the misfortune of taking a class in Imperial Law under during her time as a trainee. It had not been her favorite class, and she still regarded the older man with a bit of apprehension. She was positive he could be a charming man, but he had terrorized her in the classroom, and she still avoided him as best as she could.

"Well..."

His voice had not even changed from what she remembered. It was nasally, and she could pick up the slight accent from one of the colony worlds in it. He played with the data pad that he had been putting notes into, and she rather suspected that if any Tiri still wore glasses, he would be fiddling with his at that moment. I wonder what Julie looks like with glasses; she said she used to use them for reading. With a mental start she realized she was doing it again, her thoughts were more and more drifting towards the young red-head, and she had to concentrate on what Alderson was saying, forcing herself not to consider how cute Julie must have looked with them on.

"It will be tricky, considering all the different nations and laws we'll be dealing with. I just know that many of these nations are going to start arguing about sovereign rights soon. We'll do our best to force the issue to be heard in Imperial courts, where we have quite a lot of precedent to back us up. I shall have to look into the exact wording of their attempts before I can give you a more definite answer though, Sire."

The Emperor nodded and glanced around the table. Something else was going on here, Emily was positive of it. Her father would not have called an emergency meeting to only tell them that. With a glance towards Weston she raised an eyebrow in silent question. Weston shook his head slightly, indicating he hadn't a clue either. Frowning ever so slightly, she looked back towards her father.

"I expected that to be Lord Alderson's answer to this information, and many of you must be wondering why I called this meeting if that is all he can tell us at the moment. While it is true that Lord Alderson can not tell us much more until he has had a chance to look over the documents we have from these companies, we can determine what our stance is to be on this issue."

Lady Lorin, in charge of the infrastructure and the resources necessary to build it, leaned forwards slightly, speaking only when the Emperor nodded towards her.

"Sire? What issue?"

"What we are going to do about the rights to at least what we consider our basic technology. We have two options, sell them to the highest bidder and further stabilize the economic stability of the Empire, or make them available, for free, to any who wish to learn how to take advantage of it."

There was a moment of silence, and then everyone began speaking at once. Emily herself stared at her father in astonishment. What he was suggesting would have some very profound impacts on humanity, whatever decision was reached. Again, the table grew quiet as the Emperor raised his hand.

"Lord Tharsin, I believe you spoke first?"

Lord Tharsin, head of the Imperial Treasury was a small man by Tiri standards, only five and a half feet tall by the old empirical measurements. His shock-black hair was another oddity in a race that tended towards light colors. He was a distant cousin of the Windstar family, and, perhaps despite that, had managed to rise to his current position on his own.

"I would suggest we consider selling them very carefully."

He glared at the others who began to speak, waiting for them to silence before continuing to present his opinion.

"Our economic status is not secure as the humans measure these things. We could acquire enough currency from nearly every nation on Earth to allow us to continue with the rapid build up. Otherwise, we will be heavily in debt by the time we conclude the build up, and our economy will be quite strained even before the Bak'ra arrive."

So saying, he sat back in his chair, yielding the table. Emily found herself raising her hand slightly, and nodded as the Emperor recognized her.

"With all due respect, Lord Tharsin, I believe that we should give the instructions of how to build our basic technology away for free. It would be of great benefit to many of the nations I have visited, especially the third world countries. Imagine what our agricultural processes alone would do for them? We must also remember that the goodwill of the people towards the Empire is quite possibly of more value to us than currency at the moment."

She leaned back, and the table once more was filled with a dozen or so low-level conversations as everyone began conversing with their neighbor. The Emperor allowed the conversations to continue for some time, listening to a few of them and nodding slightly as he recognized a valid point. It did, however, come down to what Emily and Tharsin had said. Which one did they require most, a stable economic status to continue the build up, or the good will of the people?

Finally the Emperor slowly raised his hand once more, and the auditorium once more grew silent, awaiting his decision on this. More than one of the representatives in that auditorium would be affected by whatever the decision was.

"I thank you all for your input into this. I believe I have reached my decision. Lady Lorin, you will make the plans available for our basic technology to anyone who requires them. That is all; this meeting is at an end. Weston and Emily, please wait a few moments, I would have a talk with the two of you. Ah, one more thing before you all depart."

The few who had begun to stand and gather their things as the Emperor wrapped up the meeting stopped and waited respectfully, even those few who looked a bit ill after the Emperor's decision regarding Tiri technology.

"I want elections to be scheduled within the next three months for an Imperial senate. Now, I know that many of you have not had a chance to read over the Imperial government, and how it was formed. I suggest you do before we begin setting up for these elections. That is all."

The noise level once more rose in the auditorium, and all those at the table rose and bowed to the Emperor before filing out. Emily watched with curiosity as more than a few in nearby seats began excitedly talking about the upcoming elections. This would be the first world wide elections ever held, and Emily suspected that it was going to be a learning experience for everyone involved. Grinning, she cast a look towards Weston, thank the Maker she was not involved in the diplomatic side of things. Marin guards aided the rest of the auditorium occupants to quickly and efficiently file out. Once the doors were closed, Emily looked towards her father and arched an eyebrow.

"Father? What may I do for you?"

Weston nodded in support of her words, and looked at their father expectantly. Slowly the Emperor rose from his seat and fetched himself a cup of tea, using the time to marshal his thoughts.

"I wished to ask you, Emie, what do you propose to do with this Betty?"

"Father, I do not think we can do much with her unless she wishes us to. The only way we could remove her from the computer core without her permission would be to shut down the entire network and then purge them. Which we can't do unless you are willing to shut down the fusion plants and the gravitic systems."

Emily watched in concern as her father slowly lowered himself down into his chair, wincing as he did so.

"Father?"

The Emperor waved away her questioning concern and took a few deep breaths.

"It is nothing Emie."

Weston and the First Guardian shared a look of concern, as their father carefully took a sip of tea and leaned back in his chair. The vital energy that he had exuded during the meeting fading away to leave behind an old man who's shoulders bore the weight of not one, but several worlds survival.

"I think I should like to have a word with this Betty, when I return to Mars Base. Now, how are the two of you? I seldom have a chance to talk to either of you these days. I wanted to tell you both that I think that these human women that you seem to have become attracted to are quite nice, and that God will make a good Empress one day. I don't envy either of them, since they will have to keep the two of you in check."

"Father! We aren't that bad."

The Emperor let loose a rather undignified snort of disbelief in answer to her brother's outcry and Emily had to hide a grin by taking a sip of her coffee.

"Son, trust me, neither of you are easy to get along with on occasion. I think those two are up to the task though. Now, come, let us discuss how we are doing preparing for the Bak'ra over dinner, I find myself feeling a tad hungry after that meeting."

Julie yawned as she stretched, working out the kinks from having been bent over that computer console for so long. Finally though, it was over, her second training session was over. Waving towards the others in the van she hopped out as the van came to a stop by her house, and slammed the door shut after her. It was autumn now, and the trees had turned colors, and were just starting

to drop their leaves. Julie personally thought it was a beautiful sight, and she indulged herself in staring at the trees behind the house, taking in the gold and red colored leaves.

The damage to the base caused by the Bak'ra raiders had been repaired a while ago, and Julie could hardly tell where the pulsar darts had ripped apart most of the wooden porch. Still, the memory of those days lived on, and she found that she woke up from nightmares more than ever now, and was fairly certain that the horrible image of watching the first two Trainee's being cut down across the oval from her was always going to invade her dreams. The day, however, was far too nice for her to brood on that, and she could not resist a smile up towards the blue sky. Closing her eyes, she spread her arms and tilted her face towards the sun, enjoying the warmth it offered, since the days were starting to get a bit brisk.

"Having fun?"

"Piss off Mary, I'm having a moment here."

"Hmm... does this moment have anything to do with a certain First Guardian, because if it does I'll leave you two alone?"

Julie dropped her hands and did her best to glare up at the teenager who was lounging against one of the pillars on the porch.

"It didn't until you mentioned her."

"Hey, not my fault you haven't seen your girlfriend in over a month now."

"Mary!"

"What? She isn't your girlfriend?"

Green eyes narrowed as Emily leaped up the stairs and mock threatened her friend with a fist.

"You know it's a bad idea to threaten frustrated people."

"Oh poor Julie, she's frustrated. Guess I'll just leave you alone with your memories and hope you figure out how to handle that hmm?"

"Mary..."

Her tone of warning did nothing but cause the younger trainee to burst into laughter. Julie folded her arms over her chest and tapped her foot, waiting for Mary to come back to earth.

"I'm sorry, it's just you got this half exasperated, half embarrassed expression on your face."

"Hmph. Just you wait until you start liking someone and see how much sympathy I'm going to have for you! I just knew I shouldn't have told you about Emie."

Mary chuckled and hugged her in answer to that, before heading for the door. Julie smiled and rolled her eyes behind the teenagers back before following her.

"Where are they guys?"

"HA! They were out of here so fast I barely had a chance to say goodbye. Marcus is taking Harry out to some place he knows in Mexico for the break."

They had a week long break in the schedule before all of the trainee's were due to report in for the next phase of training. Which would include actual duty time onboard Guardian ships, and the first of the capital ships, which were being produced over Mars.

"Lucky them, what are you up to during the break?"

Mary grinned excitedly in answer to that.

"Well, that depends. What are you up to during your break? I know you had something planned with Emily, but with all the trouble going on with the Regen centers are you two still doing something?"

Julie, barely, managed to avoid rolling her eyes at the mention of the current crisis. Most of the world's governments had come to the, grudging, agreement that it was in their best interest to aid the Tiri however they could. The alternative was not a pretty one, considering the Bak'ra's use for any other life form was in the form of chattel. Still, there were problem spots. Most notably a few international companies, which had managed to get patent rights to several Tiri technologies in a handful of western nations, were causing all sorts of problems. To everyone's surprise, including the Tiri, the situation had rapidly come to a head recently.

"I wish. She's out at Longbow, trying to keep things from going to hell in a hand basket. Why?"

"Well, I may just have been able to score passes for a shuttle ride to Mars Base. Whaddya think?"

Green eyes widened at that, passes on a shuttle going to Mars Base were not exactly easy to acquire, not with all the traffic going back and forth these days. Studying Mary, Julie eyed her a bit suspiciously.

"How did you get passes?"

"Hey, I didn't hack the system if that's what you're thinking. I fixed a little bug in the mainframe, and in thanks, the nice Captain got me a pair of tickets."

Julie looked at her in disbelief.

"Ok, he might have had plans on coming with me, but, wouldn't you know it, he just couldn't manage to get the week off."

Julie felt another headache coming on.

"And how, pray tell, did he manage to not get the week off?"

Mary did her best to look as innocent as she could, which wasn't very convincing, considering the evil twinkle in her eyes.

"Well, I may have nudged the duty roster slightly when I was fixing the glitch."

"Mary!"

"Oh come on, its not like I wanted to spend a week with him on Mars Base, God, what a bore that would have been. Come on Julie, you know you want to come; we have a whole week off. What else would you do? Just stay here and hope that the problems were settled soon enough for Emily to come and spend some time with you? You know that if that happens she'll come see you at Mars Base."

When that didn't work, Mary did her best puppy dog look and stuck out her lower lip.

"Puhleez?"

That got a laugh out of the red head and Julie batted her on the arm.

"Fine. Mars Base was fun last time; we might as well enjoy the week off. I promised Emie I would try and stay out of trouble, how much trouble could I get in on Mars Base? Since we already foiled a plot to blow it up, I figure it shouldn't have any more problems for a while."

Chapter Twenty

Emily stared in disbelief at her Provost.

"What do you mean that it's not the Vice President?"

Her tone of disbelief caused him to swallow, and he did his utmost to keep himself from reacting to the growing anger on the First Guardian's face.

"The man claims to be the recently appointed ambassador to the Empire, for the United States, Ma'am."

"Angwar, I did not come down here to talk to some Ambassador. We need to sort out this nonsense about the Regen Centers, and quickly. Dealing with this Ambassador is not going to do that!"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Where is our, Visitor?"

Angwar recognized that look in her eyes it did not bode well for the person she was irritated with.

"He was escorted to conference room four, Ma'am."

"We'll see about that."

Angwar winced slightly as the First Guardian stormed out of the command center and headed towards the conference room, located two decks above, her honor guard trailing behind her. The Ambassador was not going to enjoy the First Guardian's visit, he was positive of that. It was bad enough that she had been called to take part in settling this and having to deal with diplomatic situations, but what was even worse was this had erupted during the small vacation she had been planning for weeks with Julie. The First Guardian had been in a bad mood for the last two days, growing more irritable as she had to suffer the seemingly endless courtesy calls from American, Canadian, and Mexican officials. In an attempt to settle what was rapidly becoming an international incident between the Tiri and several multinational companies. The oil and pharmaceutical companies were the worst though. Probably because they had the most to lose if the Regen-centers and the Tiri fuel cells became standard technology, which they did not control. After the months of attacks from them, it was obvious that most of the Empire had lost sympathy for them. Since the Tiri valued actions above words, the actions that the companies had taken, to attempt to halt the free Regeneration treatments, were seen through a very poor light. The free access to those centers for all citizens was among one of the most sacred freedoms, which all Tiri held dear. Otherwise only those who could afford it would get the life prolonging treatments, which would invariably lead to a class structure. That had been the original cause of the Miner's revolts, and the Empire had learned from that dearly bought lesson.

No, the First Guardian was not in a good mood, and the Provost almost spared him a bit of pity. Shaking his head he went off to double check on the supplies that were being sent up to North Star, and get an update on the construction of the orbital forts.

To say that Emily was annoyed was a gross understatement of the facts. She seethed on her way down the corridor, and throughout the lift ride up two decks. Her honor guard knew better than to draw any attention to themselves when the First Guardian was in such a state of mind, and she barely noticed them as she stalked out of the lift, barely waiting for the doors to slide open.

She'd been summoned as a Windstar to attempt to negotiate with these companies, while her brother and father, dealt with other problems in South East Asia, and Africa. Weston was going to owe her big time for this one. *I should never have agreed to help with this, it's taking too long, and now I don't even get to spend anytime with Julie. Argh!*

The two Marines stationed outside of the conference room came to attention as she approached, one of them activating the door for her as she passed.

"Thank you Marine."

Her voice, she was certain was cold, and she felt the Marine stiffen in surprise at her tone as she passed him and entered the room beyond. After the Emergency meeting the First Guardian had been able to return to finish her week of teaching, and enjoy at least the last of Julie's free days with her, hiking through the nearby Adirondack Mountains. They had made plans to spend Julie's week off together to celebrate the end of her training sessions. Unfortunately, those plans had disappeared now that these international companies were doing their best to try and make certain that they were the ones controlling who paid for Tiri technology.

Emily had arranged a meeting with the US vice president, a man by the name of Charles Fairchild, to attempt to make certain that the Government understood the Tiri position on this and sort out the current problems. She had been assured that the Vice President would arrive this morning. That, however, had turned out to not be the case, and Emily had reached her limit with these diplomats who said one thing and did another. To a Tiri, actions were more important than words, and the Governments actions were clear as far as Emily was concerned.

Her appearance was sudden enough to cause the portly man in the room to nearly choke on the coffee he was sipping.

"Mr. Ambassador?"

Her tone was not exactly welcoming as she crossed through the room; blue eyes narrowing in annoyance as the man set aside the coffee cup and smiled nervously.

"I'm sorry for the change in plans Lady Windstar, but the Vice President could not make it, I am Ambassador Bussard."

Emily ground her teeth together, while her lips pulled back in what could have, possibly, be called a smile by anyone who did not look closely. The Honor Guard stiffened at the slur to her tightly, whether intentional or not.

"That is, First Guardian Windstar, Ambassador."

The balding man's smile faltered slightly at that, and then returned full force as he offered her his hand. The First Guardian grimaced and shook the offered hand, despite the fact that traditionally Tiri offered each other small bows in welcome.

"It's a pleasure to meet you First Guardian Windstar. I understand you want to discuss the possibility of setting up a meeting with the president to discuss what you might perceive as an attempt by certain companies to restrict access to some technology. Which, may or may not, actually be Tiri technology."

Emily stared in astonishment at the man as he went on, and on, to discuss the reasons why the technology might not actually be Tiri technology. Then why it would be important to stop the technology from being accessed by just anyone, such as, heaven forbid, the third world countries. The First Guardian's posture stiffened more and more throughout the Ambassador's assault on her intelligence. The Honor Guard took their cue from her, and drew to attention, glaring at the

Ambassador. Who didn't seem to even notice as he proceeded to go into the problems associated with getting a meeting with the president, since he was a very busy man, didn't she know that, and he could not just drop everything to have a meeting with her, even if she was the First Guardian, and what exactly did a First Guardian do?

The First Guardian in question watched in near disbelief as the man before her rambled on with no sign of stopping anytime soon. The question about what a Guardian did was the last straw though, and she slammed her hand down on the top of the table, which separated them, resisting the urge to leap across it and strangle him to silence.

"Shut Up!"

Ambassador Bussard stopped in mid sentence and stared in surprise at what he surely thought was the mad woman across from him. He opened his mouth to ask what right she had to tell him to be quiet; didn't she realize he was an Ambassador for the United States?

Emily pointed her finger at him and growled.

"If you open your mouth once more, I will have you tossed out of here on your fat behind. Do you understand me?"

She loomed over his five foot seven inches, and the Ambassador found himself nodding.

"Good. Now, listen to me very carefully Mr. Bussard. Your people assured me that I would be having a meeting with the Vice President, not some Ambassador that I have never seen before. Since I have not had that meeting, I have thus wasted the entire day down here, when I should have been taking care of shoring up the defenses for this system, to protect this Planet. Which means I am in a very bad mood."

She growled as she said the last bit, and the Ambassador felt himself take a step backwards as sweat beaded on his face.

"Now you are going to rectify this situation, and do you know how you are going to do that?"

Bussard swallowed in near terror as she took a step around the table and slowly began stalking him. He shook his head, having only the barest idea who he was still.

"You, are going to return to your government, and you are going to tell them that I will meet with the Vice President, or, the President, within a week. If I do not, I will make it my personal cause to make absolutely positive that those people whom you referred to as Third World countries, get access to our technology first. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Y-yes."

"Yes, What?"

"Y-yes F-first G-g-guardian."

The sudden smile almost made him wince, and she patted his cheek with false happiness.

"Good Boy."

Glancing towards her Honor Guards, all of whom were desperately trying not to grin, she nodded towards the Ambassador.

"Make certain that Mr. Bussard is escorted outside."

And with that, she spun around and left the sweating man behind, wondering what had just happened to him.

"You never answered my question you know."

"Hmm? What question?"

Julie and Mary had taken adjoining rooms at another hotel, called the Sunrise, which was located near the center of Mars Base. The Gardens had been full, and Julie had no inclination to stay there without Emily. The two Trainee's rooms shared a balcony, which, while not as scenic as the veranda at the Gardens, had a nice view of the city. They had only arrived at the hotel late last night, after a full days travel from PAFB, and both had managed to get to their rooms, and collapse on their beds.

The day so far had been spent lounging on the balcony, and indulging in room service. Both of them were lounging on recliners, and sipping the drink that gave the hotel its name, a Sunrise. It was a sweet multicolored drink that probably had more alcohol than she realized.

Mary grinned and twisted around on her chair, wrinkling her nose at the red haired woman.

"Are you and Emily, well, you know?"

"Are we what?"

"Are you together, geez."

Julie laughed and settled a bit deeper down into her recliner, gazing up at the dome high above. Taking a sip of the cold drink that room service had brought up only a few minutes before.

"What makes you think we're together?"

Mary made a snorting noise and flopped over onto her stomach. Both were enjoying the relatively warm temperatures inside of the dome, and wearing T-shirts and shorts.

"Because I've seen you together, its just so obvious."

"Well, if it's so obvious, I don't have to answer now, do I?"

"Ergh! Come on Julie, you two are killing me here, at least let me have some romance to be happy about!"

The chirping of an incoming com signal saved Julie from further inquisitions into her relationship with the First Guardian. Almost leaping from the recliner she headed in towards her room, calling over her shoulder as she went.

"Guess you'll just have to content yourself with God and Weston then."

She was laughing at the gagging noises behind her when she reached the com panel. A quick glance indicated that it was a long distance signal, being routed to the Base from Earth, and Julie smiled as she spotted the ID tag that came with it. It was a prerecorded message, unfortunately, since the ten-minute delay for communications between Earth and Mars made conversations a bit difficult. Still, Julie was happy to get something from the First Guardian. It was nowhere close to being as good as seeing her in person, but these little messages had helped keep her sane through most of her training.

"Hey you, I only have a few minutes before I have to take a shuttle back up to North Star. You would not believe what idiot I had to deal with today in the government, I swear Julie, and I was going to wring his neck. He just kept on blabbering and going on and on..."

Julie couldn't resist grinning as she watched Emily look upwards and mock pray for divine aid.

"I swear, I'm getting towards the end of my patience with these guys, and if they try to jerk me around one more time I'll snap. I really am sorry I didn't get to take you on a vacation, and I'm going to make it up to you. If we get this settled soon enough I'll meet you at Mars Base and take you to this great restaurant that I know. Have fun with Mary, and remember, don't get into trouble! Bye sweetheart."

She smiled at that and lightly touched the com screen where the First Guardian's face had just been. *She called me sweetheart.*

"Oh yeah, well that settles my question."

"Mary!"

Julie spun around so fast she nearly fell down and stared at the younger trainee, who was leaning up against the side of the open sliding door, grinning.

"Oh calm down Julie, it was pretty obvious. I even made a few bucks off the boys on a bet."

The color drained slowly from Julie's face at that.

"You bet about it?"

"Well, Duh, it was a pretty sure fire way to take some of their money, of course I bet on it."

Groaning, Julie messaged her temples as another headache began to make its presence known. If the boys knew, then the base gossip vine probably had spread it already. She couldn't remember seeing any odd looks tossed her way, but maybe that was because she hadn't been paying attention. *Or maybe*, her little voice reminded her, *no one cares*.

"Come on Julie, wanna go and see some of the sights?"

"Ah, no, I think I'll just stay here and enjoy some peace and quiet for a bit. I've got a bit of a headache again."

The teasing smile disappeared at that, and Mary took a step inside frowning.

"Hey, I'm sorry about teasing you, but the Tiri don't care you know? And I thought you two deserved at least to be happy, and, well, you look good together."

"It's ok Mary, don't worry, I think I want to lounge around here for a bit and just relax."

"You sure? You've been having a lot of those headaches recently, maybe we should get you to see a doctor?"

"Mary, it's just a headache, don't worry. Go on and have fun, I'll take a nice long bubble bath later on, maybe indulge in a nap, I just need some rest."

"Ok, if you're sure. I'll be back around dinner time, and we can grab some food together."

Nodding Julie waited until her fellow trainee had left before wincing and rubbing her temple again. The headaches were indeed getting stronger, and more frequent. The littlest things set them off, and she was starting to get a bit worried. If they kept up after the vacation was over, she decided she would go see the base doctor once they got back to PAFB. For now though, she was going to take a nap and then have a nice long soak in that huge hot tub.

"Weston, I don't really give a shit who they think they are, I am not going to give in to what are essentially bully tactics and close down the Regeneration Centers! By the Maker, I don't know what's gotten into them, but these companies aren't backing down in the face of reason."

Weston sighed and rubbed his hands over his face, even through the com panel Emily could tell how tired her brother was.

"Do what you can Emie. Intelligence thinks that someone, or someone's, is pushing these companies to do this. The Maker only knows why they would try something this idiotic, but they are doing there best to annoy all of us. I have another meeting with some of the leaders down here, and Father is doing what he can in Africa. Take care and let me know if anything else pops up."

"Will do, good hunting Weston."

"Good hunting Emie."

Ending the com call, she leaned back in the chair, staring up at the ceiling of her guest quarters at Longbow base. After putting a bit of terror into the Ambassador, she was fully expecting the call that came two hours later from a very apologetic Vice President. She had been assured that there had been a mix up of sorts, and that he would have time to schedule a meeting with her tomorrow. Which she didn't particularly believe, but at least she would get her meeting. Which was good, since the local "Authorities" had shown up just before sundown with a cease and desist order from the state courts. It ordered her to shut down the Regeneration Clinics located at Longbow base, until such time as the issue was settled. In an American court, she noted with a mental snort. The international companies had gone through with their threats, and applied for patents on basic Tiri technology. Even after said technology was to be made available for free, by Imperial decree.

The man, an officer of the courts, if she understood that correctly, had handed her the order to cease and desist, along with the thinly veiled threat that if it was not followed through, they, whoever they were, would take steps to stop the daily long lines of people who formed to get the prolong treatments. Similar events had taken place at the Regen clinics across most of the continent, and she knew that her father and brother were having their own problems in Africa and South-east Asia. Her response to the threat was to smile predatorily, and respond that any such act would be considered an act of war.

The man had stammered a bit and left quickly after that.

Things were on the verge of getting out of control, and lashing out at the messenger of this particular bad news had probably not been her wisest course of action. Still, it had been nearly as satisfying as sending the Ambassador away with his tail between his legs.

The high point of her day though, had been getting a message back from Julie in response to the one she had sent out earlier. Unfortunately the ten minute delay made a good conversation pretty much impossible, and tying up that much bandwidth on the communications arrays was prohibited unless for an emergency. Such as her talk with Nicholas after the Mars Base incident. Still, if she managed to sort things out with the vice president tomorrow, and she would sort them out or else, she would have time to get to Mars Base before Julie's week off ended.

Grinning at the thought of seeing the cute red head soon, she sat upright once more and reached for the first of the stack of reports that Angwar had delivered for her to review earlier. Thoughts of a particular Guardian Trainee kept distracting her from her work in the most wonderful of ways.

Said Guardian Trainee was lounging on a balcony, reading a Tiri historical novel, and sipping a freshly delivered margarita. The headache had slowly disappeared after taking some analgesics, and Julie had spent the afternoon relaxing in a nice long bath, taking a nap and now reading. It was getting towards the evening, and she set aside the data pad in favor of watching the dome

lights slowly dim. It wasn't as good as watching a sunset, but still, the Tiri had taken pains to make it as close to that as they could, even making random shades of red arc across the dome before the lights slowly shut down.

She was just languidly considering heading inside to continue reading, when the sound of packages being tossed onto a bed, and a light coming on, signaled Mary's return. Stretching first, Julie got up and carried her things with her to see what the teenager had been up to all day. Peeking inside the sliding doorway she grinned at the number of packages spread across the bed.

"Have fun?"

Mary grinned in answer and began sorting through the clothing and computer parts that she had bought.

"Oh yes, I didn't have enough to buy one of those portable computers they use, but I got enough components to put my own together."

Shaking her head Mary wandered in and claimed a seat.

"Why get your own when you can get one issued to you?"

Mary shot her a look that clearly said that she was missing the point.

"That's not the same, I want to build one, and tinker with it. It's more fun that way. Oh, and guess who I got to talk to today?"

Wondering when Mary expected to have time to tinker with a computer, and hoping that she wasn't thinking of only doing that for the rest of the week, Julie smiled.

"Who?"

"I got to talk to Betty."

The red head blinked in surprise at that, and Mary grinned proudly, arranging the components she had bought on the top of the armoire to inspect after dinner.

"And guess what else I did. I got passes to go up and get a tour of one of the orbiting shipyards tomorrow morning. Isn't that so cool?"

"Mary..."

At Julie's warning tone the younger Trainee smiled as innocently as she could.

"Yes?"

"You didn't, by any chance, manage to get passes to go up to see these shipyards the same way you got passes to come to Mars Base?"

"No! Of course not."

Julie relaxed slightly at that.

"Betty got them for me."

The ship was definitely not of Tiri, or Human design. Its almost organic shape was far different than the flowing elegant lines of Tiri construction, and no Human nation had the technology yet to produce anything like it. It was a bit shorter than a Tiri drop ship, and more needle like in shape than the boxy drop ships were. It was prepared for use inside a temporary base, located inside of a dormant volcano in Southern America. The latent heat of the ground, and the sheer amount of rock, covered it from detection from the orbiting Tiri sensor platforms.

The figures milling about the craft took particular care loading twelve heavy cylinders. Each of which were marked in Russian, and had taken a bit of doing to obtain. They would be worth the effort though, and the figures carefully strapped each of the cylinders down inside of the craft.

When it was ready, the twelve figures that had prepared it for launch climbed aboard with the fluid movements of natural athletes. The brief power spike as the ships power plant powered up was detected by one of the half finished Orbital Defense Forts, but the technician on duty thought it was a sensor glitch.

Careful to keep its speed down, the craft crept out of the maw of the volcano, and headed upwards. Its drives were even stealthier than the Tiri scout ships, and it made it out of the atmosphere with little trouble. There were holes in the sensor nets that the Empire was still deploying, which would not be closed until the last of the orbital forts were brought online.

Slipping through those holes, the ship disappeared into interplanetary space, heading towards Mars. The twelve stolen thermonuclear warheads safely stowed onboard.

Chapter Twenty-One

It was, Emily conceded, one way to make an entrance. The shuttle had been escorted from Longbow Base by a flight of no less than six Tiri fighters. They had cleanly peeled off of formation only when the shuttle itself was beginning its slow descent towards the helicopter pad below it. The four Marine Honor Guards had been supplemented by another eight, as she was here, not only as First Guardian, but as a member of the Imperial Family, and representing her father. She was in her dress uniform with rows of medals across her left breast, most of which she usually avoided wearing.

You would think that after centuries of having Guardians, that the Empire could have made dress uniforms that were comfortable to wear. I look like a walking pincushion.

With another curse at her brother for getting her into the diplomatic side of things, she waited until the shuttle had touched down and the antigravity drives had been secured, before undoing her safety harness. This would be the first official visit of a member of the Imperial family to the White House, and she was determined to try her best to make certain it went well. Sparing one more evil thought towards her brother, she emerged into the evening behind the full Honor Guard. The American Secret Service were no doubt having fits over the full combat load that tradition, and Imperial, law demanded each of her Honor Guards wear.

Thankfully, the rain that had been pounding the ground at Longbow was absent in Washington DC. Emily could only hope that was an omen of sorts. With a nod to Angwar, who she was amused to see was having just as much fun with his dress uniform as she was, she stepped out of the shuttle. A small group of reporters had been allowed to film the event, and she grimaced slightly at the rapid onslaught of flashes. Thank the Maker that the Marines know those are used for the cameras. Flashes had not been used for a long time on Tiri recording devices, and most Marines would have confused those flashes with a plasma weapon firing.

Stepping down between the double row of guards, Emily suppressed a smile as she saw the tension on their faces. They might have known what it was, but reactions had been trained into them, and more than one of them clutched their pulse rifles tightly. Angwar was exactly three steps behind her and to her right, as set by protocol for a Provost attending a function with a Guardian. Behind him came the dozen diplomatic corps members who would take the opportunity of this meeting to work through the mountain of minor issues that still needed to be dealt with between the Empire and every nation on Earth.

Her threats had apparently had the desired result, and the following morning they had received not only an apology for what was termed a diplomatic mix up, but an invitation to the White House for a face-to-face meeting with the President; something that Emily suspected would have been much more impressive for someone who had not grown up in the Imperial Palace.

The four last Honor Guards, her normal entourage, followed directly after her and Angwar as they headed down the red carpet towards the waiting welcoming party near the White House. The other eight remained with the shuttle, which had been a concession to the Secret Service.

With the practiced ease of one who had grown up in the spotlight, Emily ignored the reporters, instead focusing her attention on the waiting group ahead of them.

President William S. Blake was a tall man, nearly the height of the First Guardian herself. His face had a weather beaten appearance, reflecting his days as a construction worker during his youth. Beside the gray-haired president, Vice President Charles H. Fairchild stood a good four inches shorter. Both of them waited respectfully, along with the myriad of aides and a small group of unobtrusive Secret Service agents.

"Mr. President, a pleasure to finally meet you."

No Windstar worth the name would pass up the opportunity to at least present the illusion of agreement between the Empire and as powerful a nation as the U.S. was. The fact that her father

had sent her a note nearly ordering her to offer her hand to the human had not hurt at all of course.

"First Guardian, welcome to the White House."

His grip at least was refreshingly strong and she found herself grinning as she returned the handshake.

"Mr. President, First Guardian, everything is set."

"Thank you, Charles. Let us get down to business, First Guardian, and hopefully we'll straighten this out."

"I would like that, Mr. President."

With a bit of a raised eyebrow, she followed the President down the hallway, past even more unobtrusive, and not so unobtrusive, security personnel, and into the Oval Office. The Vice President did not follow them, she noticed, and she nodded slightly towards Angwar at his slightly raised eyebrow. He had been her Provost long enough to understand her unspoken command and he remained outside as well, along with the Honor Guard, leaving the two of them alone in the Oval Office. It was, she admitted, glancing around, just as she had seen on the human news broadcasts.

"First Guardian, I thought we could perhaps talk alone for a while, and let the others work out the little issues, while we addressed the major ones?"

"I think that might be an excellent idea, Mr. President, considering the potential for disaster that this situation has."

Taking a seat on one of the couches that he waved her towards, she continued as he sat down opposite her. A tray of tea and coffee was already on the low table separating the two and he offered her a cup of tea as she spoke.

"Mr. President, I hope you understand that the meeting with that Ambassador did not improve the opinion the Tiri have for this country."

She studied the man as she took the cup, after the recent maneuvering in the courts, and the Ambassador, Emily needed to get a feel for how this man thought.

"First Guardian, you must understand that there are more interests at work than just yours."

With a slight frown Emily took a sip of her tea, frowning as she thought over his words. There were subtle nuances of what was being said and not said. Weston was going to owe her big time for this one. Tactics she could understand, but this diplomatic stuff was rapidly pushing her towards the limit.

"Mr. President, can we dispense with these formalities, and as the English saying goes, cut the bullshit?"

With a nod, the President sat down his own cup of coffee before having even taken a sip.

"Very well. You want it plain then?"

"I would like nothing better."

She watched carefully as he sat back, and took a breath.

"I would be lying if I am not alarmed myself at how bare our Armed Forces are now. You've stripped nearly every available man and woman from them. And then more than a few Senators and Congressman are being pushed by very influential Lobbyists to get what they want."

"I will assume that you already have a firm grasp of what is at stake here, Mr. President, since you do not strike me as a man who ignores reality."

Emily chose her next words carefully, studying the poker face across from her.

"If you continue to support these actions against us, you are going to only aid the Bak'ra by slowing us down. Imagine what that little bit of information will do for your political party's chances in the upcoming Imperial Senate elections, or even the next Presidential elections."

She had his attention and she smiled as she took a slow sip of tea, as silence reigned, broken only by the muted ticking of a grandfather clock. Just when she was beginning to fear that she had managed to make things worse, the impassive face across from her twitched slightly.

"You do prefer to just lay it out there don't you, First Guardian."

With a laugh he shook his head.

"Very well, First Guardian, I think that it won't come to that. God, I hope it won't! I think you can dispense with calling me Mr. President, and just call me Will, or Blake. Not Bill though, I always hated it when people called me that."

"Very well, Blake, we can dispense with the First Guardian stuff then, and call me Emily. Shall we talk about specifics then?"

"I almost fear to, Emily, but yes I suppose that would be for the best."

Two hours later they had come to an understanding, of sorts at least. A couple dozen of the legal pads that the President preferred to write on were spread across the table and the floor near them. Neither of them had particularly wanted to have an aid take notes for them. Angwar found them arguing over a how many Senator's each country would receive when he cautiously entered.

"Ah, Mr. President, let me introduce you to my Provost."

Both stood and her Provost shook hands with the President, glancing towards her with a bit of nervousness.

"Ma'am, if you have a moment?"

"Excuse me, Blake."

"Go right ahead, Emily, I think I'll go see what that Vice President of mine and the others are up to."

She grinned at the look on Angwar's face as the two of them were apparently on a first and last name basis.

"Didn't think I would be able to play nice, Angwar?"

"Of course not, Ma'am, it's just that..."

Emily couldn't avoid chuckling at that, and decided to have pity on her Provost.

"I was able to get away from being diplomatic. What did you want to see me about?"

"Ah, that would explain it."

The grin disappeared and she eyed him at that, even as he handed her the data pad that he had brought with him.

"Secure communication from Major Sims just came in for you, Ma'am. I thought it would be best that you see it right away. Its encoded Priority One."

Priority One was only used in emergencies, or in some cases, when the material contained in the communication was considered highly sensitive. Just to access the data she had to enter her full Command Authorization Code along with allowing the pad to sample her DNA and compare it to the DNA signature of the intended recipient.

"Thank you, Angwar."

Whatever it was, it had to be serious for the Major to have sent it Priority One. The First Guardian frowned as she waited for the pad to confirm her identity and access the message that it contained. When it did she went perfectly still, taking in the implications of what that message meant.

"Angwar, we'll be leaving. Leave the others here to continue their negotiations, and I will give my regrets to the President, but as soon as that is done we're taking off for North Star."

"Ma'am?"

She was already headed for the doorway, and he had to hurry to keep up.

"Seems that someone managed to steal a dozen thermonuclear warheads from the Russians. The Major traced the elusive General Whittecker out there, and then to South America. Seems that when he and the rapid response team he called in got to the place, it was empty. Major Sims asked for a review of the orbital sensor scans, and it seems that one of the Orbital Forts got a read on what looks to be the power spike of an engine powering up."

"What sort of engine, Ma'am?"

"It had a Bak'ra signature. I think we should get out to Mars as fast as possible, and alert all the shipyards of a possible security risk."

The two of them shared a glance at that, both understanding what that meant. They had hoped, prayed, that the last sabotage incident had been the end of the infiltrators. Apparently they were not.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Send a response to Major Sims, and get his team working on also finding out where these infiltrators might have come from. I think I'll find out where Julie is since she seems to attract trouble like a small black hole."

Any other time that would have brought a smile to her Provost's lips, this time he nodded as he heard the true note of fear in her voice.

"She does seem prone to being at the center of things, Ma'am. I'll meet you at the shuttle."

He headed down the hallway back towards the shuttle while Emily and her Honor Guards went to find the President and apologize for the early end to the negotiations. Even as she nodded absently to the Secret Service member who guided her down the hallway towards where the President was, her mind was already occupied with this new information. If these Bak'ra had not arrived with them in the Evacuation, and she was fairly certain they had not given the complete security and medical exams of all the Tiri evacuees, that only left one conclusion. A conclusion she did not like at all, and one that was bound to have dire consequences for the Empire, and Human kind.

"Mary, would you stop bouncing around, you're making my headache worse."

Julie snapped, wincing as the younger trainee thudded back down into her crash seat. They were in one of the many shuttles', which ferried personnel and supplies back and forth between Mars Base and the orbiting shipyards. There were a total of twenty-five shipyards operational now, with each of the massive spindle shaped objects having ten slips. All of the Guardian-Class ships were being constructed in Mars orbit, with what slips were left over going towards building the

ships which would make up the battle groups. A constant, almost endless, train of transports brought materials to the shipyards from the asteroid refineries. Almost four million Humans and Tiri worked around the clock in a bid to complete those ships as quickly as possible.

She had woken up without a headache, something that the redhead was quite grateful for. That however had only lasted until they had reached the shuttle, and then the pounding headache had returned. Julie was going to have to see the base doctor when she got back to PAFB, even she couldn't deny that. The pounding had only gotten worse on the shuttle ride up to the first of those shipyards, and Mary's squirming as she tried to get a glimpse of the shipyards as they approached had finally driven her to snap at the teenager. . She'd been quite during the ride up; looking over the computer parts she had bought the last evening, and the new one's she had somehow "acquired" this morning. Now though she was practically jumping up and down trying to get a look out the view port.

"Sorry, headache?"

Julie nodded and rubbed her temples once more, trying to at least reduce some of the pounding.

"Yeah. I'll see the doctors when we get back to PAFB."

"You sure you want to come along? I mean, I can go alone and you can go back down with the shuttle with the off-duty workers?"

Julie spared a glance out the small view port next to her, and then shook her head, carefully.

"No, we're almost docked, I'll stick around for the tour. I want to see what this new ship design is like."

"As long as you're sure. Maybe we can stop by the shipyards medical bay and get you something for the headache?"

Forcing a bit of a pained smile, Julie nodded and patted Mary on her shoulder, as best she could while still strapped down in the acceleration chair. That was a small problem with traveling by shuttle, or any of the other small Tiri ships, they didn't have artificial gravity. Weightlessness had not improved Julie's mood either, and she was more than a bit happy when they entered the shuttle docking bay of the first completed Guardian ships.

"Sounds like a plan, lets go."

The painkillers she got from the shipyards med bay were enough to dull the pounding to a more manageable level, and she was feeling nearly human by the time they started the tour.

"It's different than the Version Thirteen Guardian-Class, see how we widened the corridors by another foot? The Tiri don't seem to mind having enclosed spaces, but most humans prefer at least the illusion of more room. That's going to be the Secondary Damage Control Center, we're a bit behind on installing the computer access panels at the moment."

Even with the passes that Mary had obtained, and Julie was positive she didn't want to know exactly how Betty had gotten those security passes, they had an escort onboard ship. The fleet Lieutenant had been more than happy to escort the two of them, and even with the remnants of her headache, Julie had to resist grinning at his rather obvious attempts to impress the two of them with his knowledge of the ship.

Alpha, as the test ship was called, was the first operational Variant Fourteen Class Guardian ships. Well, mostly operational, she amended, glancing towards the control center that they were passing. The tour itself was turning out to be very interesting, and she hadn't even minded the attempts by Lieutenant Lewis to flirt with both her and Mary at the same time. Julie had a sudden image of Emily scowling and chasing away the Lieutenant.

"Feeling better, huh?"

Mary was grinning at her as they waited for the lift to arrive, and Julie did her best to stop giggling at the sudden image. Lieutenant Lewis was looking at her a bit oddly, and she realized that she had interrupted his explanation of the new lift lay out.

"Yeah, feeling a bit better. Where to next?"

The Lieutenant beamed as both of the trainees looked back at him and answered just as the lift doors slid open.

"I'll bring you up to the Command Deck and show you the command center. Then after that, we can go take a look at the new gravitic lance. It's just been installed and they finished calibrating it yesterday. Alpha is due to go out for its ship builder's trials next week. That's why we don't have many workers onboard at the moment."

All of which he had already said when they first came onboard, and at least twice since then whenever he ran out of something else to say. Hiding a quick jolt of annoyance, Julie nodded and stepped into the lift after Mary and Lewis.

"Is a Guardian going to bond to Alpha?"

The Lieutenant finished entering his authorization code, and the lift sped upwards towards the Command Deck, located as close to the center of the ship as was possible.

"No, this ship's just scheduled to test out the new technology and weapon systems that are being incorporated into the other Variant Fourteens. I don't really know what they plan on doing with Alpha afterwards though."

The lift slowed to a stop as it arrived at Command Deck, and the Lieutenant made a big show of bowing the two Guardian Trainees through the doors after they had slid open. Julie had to fight to keep from rolling her eyes, while Mary giggled at the gesture. Technically, as trainees they didn't hold a rank of any sort within the Empire. However, they were Guardian Trainees and that

granted them a certain status, ranging from awe in some, to ill-concealed jealousy in others. *Just one of the lovely side effects of being different, I guess, nothing new there for me.*

Despite the Lieutenant's charming attitude, Julie was having the hardest time shaking the feeling that he was just trying to get on their good sides. The slowly building headache, which was pounding behind her eyes, didn't help her mood either.

"This is one of the two access's to the Command Center. When she's finished, there will be two Marines on duty here, and at the other access, at all times. We just don't have enough manpower to do that right now though."

Julie nodded at that, rubbing her right temple as they headed towards the thick blast doors, which led to the control center. If the triple fusion reactors, which would power the ship, were its heart, then here was its brain, and its soul. The heavily shielded command center was where the ship's Guardian would be linked to her ship self, becoming a part of it.

"Wish Emie could have come along for this."

Her grumble was low enough for the Lieutenant, who had stepped through the meter and a half thick armor plating ahead of them, to miss. Mary gave her a sympathetic smile and stepped through the thick doorway as well. Wincing at how bright the lights seemed to have gotten, Julie followed them out into the Command Center.

"The layout has been changed a bit from the type Thirteen Variant..."

Julie tuned out his voice as her eyes alighted on the crash couch located at the very center of the Command Center. While Lewis explained the reasoning behind moving the communications station, Julie found herself walking towards that couch. There was only one such crash couch on each Guardian ship, and only a Guardian was allowed to use it. Despite what the Lieutenant had said, they must have been planning to have a Guardian bond with the ship if they had built that couch into the Command Center.

It was not a normal crash couch.

Throughout its surface, and arm rests, were built in direct feeds to each of the central computer cores. Allowing the Guardian to bond deeper with her ship self than she would be able to do anywhere else onboard, unless she were physically standing inside of those computer cores.

Julie was not even aware of the silence behind her as the Lieutenant and Mary both looked towards her questioningly. Even the headache did not distract her as she ran her fingers down the arm of the couch, closing her eyes as she felt the power thrumming beneath her finger tips.

Is this what Emily feels? How does she pull herself away from it?

It called to her, that link, the power that she felt just below her fingertips. The ship itself called to her. To her senses, it was not a collection of weapons, environmental systems, and engines,

wrapped in an armored hull. It was alive, coursing with a strength that called to her, a soul of its own. It was not the same connection she felt towards Emily, but it still called to her in ways she had not felt before.

He's kind of cute, but boy does he ever talk a lot. I guess he just wants to impress us with what he knows, but geez, I learned all this three months ago.

Mary did her level best to at least appear interested in what the Lieutenant was talking about, but it was hard. It wasn't that he was particularly boring; it was just that he thought that she and Julie didn't know half of the things that they did know. It wasn't as if they hadn't already been briefed on the changes that were going to be part of this version or anything.

With a mental sigh at the Lieutenant who was now talking about why the communications station had been moved, something to do with improved deck flow as far as she understood it, she glanced towards where Julie was. Or should have been anyway, the older trainee was no longer standing behind them. Blinking in surprise, Mary glanced around the Command Center until she spotted Julie down next to the Guardian's station.

Ignoring the question from Lewis, Mary took a few steps down towards the station as well.

"Julie? What's wrong?"

Her friend's eyes were closed and she had the oddest look of concentration on her face.

"Julie, what are you doing?"

Mary took another step forward even as Julie climbed up into the Guardian's Station, and pressed herself back into the full length of the crash couch.

"Hey, she's not supposed to touch that!"

Ignoring the Lieutenant once more, Mary hurried over to the couch and lightly touched her friend's wrist. Even as she tried to get Julie to open her eyes, stations, which had been powered down a moment before, sprang to life. The fusion core's, which had been on standby mode, began their activation sequence. When that got no response, she frowned and glanced around the Command Center.

"Lieutenant, I think you better go get some help. I think Julie's decided to bond to your Alpha."

"What? She can't do that!"

Rolling her eyes in annoyance Mary spun around and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Look, just get to the Med Bay, I doubt communications are working at the moment with her beginning to bond like that. They told us that there was a way to stop the bonding process, but only if you catch it early enough."

The Lieutenant, if anything, looked like he was going in shock. A quick glance towards the moved communications station proved that it was fully occupied at the moment as Julie's consciousness began spreading through the ship's systems.

"Med Bay? Um, well, we don't really have one yet."

Mary blinked in astonishment. More stations powered up, and main power came online.

"What?"

"It's not finished, we don't even have most of the equipment here yet."

Mary stared at him for a moment, then snapped herself out of it.

"Well, what about the Shipyard, surely it has a Med Bay, right?"

The Lieutenant nodded as he seized upon that idea.

"The Shipyard, of course! I'll go get help."

"Lewis?"

He stopped halfway towards the Command Center's armored doors, and looked back at her expectantly.

"Don't take the lifts, ok? And hurry!"

Shaking her head Mary knelt down next to her friend.

"I wish Emily was here also now. Come on Julie, what are you doing? You're not supposed to bond to anything for another year."

Mary hoped that the Lieutenant would get back soon, with help. If they didn't bring Julie out of this soon, the bond would be permanent. Their training had been very specific on that. If any of them started to bond to something, no one was to simply pull the person away from whatever it was. That would only cause damage to the trainee, and might even lead to a cerebral hemorrhage.

"Shit, come on, Julie, don't do this now!"

With another muttered curse she looked around the now empty Command Center for something, anything, that would help. Julie's brow was covered in sweat now, and her friend's muscles were clenching and unclenching in what looked like waves throughout her body. For lack of anything else, Mary pulled off the belt that went with the trainee uniforms that she and Julie had been forced to wear to come on the tour. That at least she managed to pry between Julie's teeth to stop her from grinding them so much.

"Ah, a med kit."

Leaving the near convulsing Guardian Trainee's side, Mary nearly sprinted across the deck towards the medical locker she had spotted. Undoing the simple magnetic locks, she flung the cover open and reached inside of the empty locker. Groaning she examined the locker, which stubbornly remained empty despite her wishes to the contrary.

"Damn it all! What is finished on this ship?"

Mary's eyes widened as she got a good look at the station right next to the medical locker. The Gravitic drive's, both the one located in the bow and the aft of the ship, had begun powering up. Apparently, they had finished the propulsion systems.

The Bak'ra craft glided through space, arcing far out towards the asteroid belt before beginning its approach towards Mars. The craft waited until it was well within the shipping lanes that were being used by the intrasystem transports and shuttles, before powering up. It shimmered, for the briefest of moments, and then in its place was the form of an Imperial drop ship. It would not hold up to a thorough sensor scan, but it was good enough for most, and would get them close enough; at least, that is what they believed.

They were headed towards the shipyards in orbit of the fifth planet in this pitiful excuse for a Solar System. Soon, the Bak'ra fleets would arrive and remove the last of the tiresome Tiri from existence, and those Guardians. Then the Bak'ra would reign over this world, as they did on many others. It was, of course, inevitable.

The original plan had been to slip through Imperial security posing as a transport shuttle from one of the many asteroid refineries. However, when they arrived at Mars orbit, chaos reigned at the shipyard that they were headed for. The target had powered up, and engaged its gravitic drives while still inside of its docking bay. Interesting.

Its power signature was compared, and the specific power spikes compared to what data was available regarding Guardians. The new Variant Fourteen class ships made the comparison more problematic than would have been acceptable, however, a conclusion was reached. A new Guardian was bonding to the target. It was a perfect opportunity for the mission to proceed with the targets destruction.

It was relatively easy to proceed towards the shipyard, while the urgent evacuation of all personnel near the target was being initiated. The destruction of the ship designated as Alpha would delay the Tiri. A pity they had only been able to acquire twelve of the inefficient human thermonuclear weapons.

Warp Gating inside of the OK limit of a solar system was fraught with problems. Attempting to form a Warp Gate inside of the gravity well of a solar system was difficult, even for a Guardian, and the distance a Warp Gate could be formed to cover was fairly short. Anything further than half an Astronomical Unit, and the gate would collapse in on itself from the gravity sheer, with very messy results for any ship trying to use it. That was, however, still far enough to form a

Warp Gate and reach Mars. Which meant that North Star emerged from its Warp Gate only an hour after Emily had left the White House.

Something she was rather glad of when she extended her senses through her ship self's sensor nets and detected the chaos evolving around Shipyard Thirteen. There were hundreds of individual transmissions going on, from the small plethora of craft and shuttles, which were doing their level best to get away from the shipyard.

Unfortunately, the gravity well limit surrounding a planet was not something that could be gotten around by doing small jumps. The more massive the planet, the farther out that gravity well extended. For Mars, with its mass less than that of Earth's, the well was not as bad as say it would have been out by Jupiter. Still, that meant North Star had emerged ten minutes from Mars Orbit, and that was at maximum acceleration and then deceleration, even after her own Gravitic Drive's came online.

"Lady Windstar, we're being hailed by Shipyard Thirteen."

Julie, you better still be on Mars Base, but why do I have the sudden feeling that this has something to do with you?

"Put it on the holo tank, Lieutenant."

Thankfully they had enough people to fill each of the stations, and her Provost was no longer relegated to doubling as a communications officer at the same time. A harried looking Fleet Major saluted as the channel was opened. He also was depressingly young looking to have risen to the status of Fleet Major, even with Re-gen treatments.

"First Guardian, we have a small problem. Alpha just powered up and its gravitic drive is activating."

Emily tensed against the safety harness, which kept her at her station while the Gravitic Drive came back online. Transiting through a Warp Gate with an active Gravitic Drive was paramount to suicide. Thus, all ships powered down their drive systems for transition and were in zero gravity for the few minutes it took to transition and then power back up the drives. Which, coincidentally, meant that a ship was at its most vulnerable when exiting a Warp Gate. North Star's sensors were still recovering from the brief insanity of transition, and even as the Major spoke she focused her attention on the blossoming power source in Shipyard Thirteen.

"What sort of problem, exactly?"

The Major visibly flinched at her tone, and he actually saluted once more.

"Well Ma'am, Lieutenant Lewis just came over and said that a Guardian Trainee had started to merge with the ship. We alerted our Med Bay, but before we could get people over there, Alpha's Gravitic Drives started to come online. I just ordered the evacuation of all workers. First Guardian, if Alpha's drives come online inside of the shipyard..."

"Understood Major, evacuate everyone you can, then give her a nudge out of the shipyard with a tractor. A nudge only, do I make myself perfectly clear, Major?"

"Yes, Ma'am!"

"Good, because I swear to the Maker, if you push her too fast, you and I are going to have a long, unpleasant chat."

"Understood, Ma'am."

Cutting the channel as the Major started to salute again, Emily tilted her head enough to glance towards Flight Ops Coordinator, not so politely known as FOC. The crimson uniform was unique among the Imperial Forces and could not be mistaken for anything else.

"Shieri, offer what assistance we can when we get close enough with our shuttles. Com, try to hail Alpha. Angwar?"

"Ma'am"

The First Guardian closed her eyes as she felt her Gravitic Drive's come online finally, and began an emergency acceleration towards Mars Orbit.

"Have the Marines prepped for a boarding action, along with a medical team."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Please Maker; let us be in time to help Julie.

There was no doubt in her mind that the Guardian Trainee that was involved in this was Julie. The redhead was an interstellar incident looking for a place to happen on the best of days, and this had her name written all over it.

"She must have begun bonding early, damn it all."

No one on the command deck was stupid enough to ask who, or what the First Guardian was talking about. It was not unheard of for gifted to begin bonding earlier than expected, there was always some variation, but this was a full year early! The only thing Emily could think of was that her time spent in Majestic had put Julie further ahead of the others.

Angwar, after seeing to his duties, unbuckled from his safety harness, now that they had gone through Transition, and moved across the deck down to where the Guardian's station was located.

"She may not be involved this time."

Keeping his voice low, and she had no need to ask whom it was her Provost was talking about. With a sigh, she urged just a bit more speed out of her Gravitic Drives. She was in emergency acceleration now, and it gave her zero margins for error. Any failure in the inertial compensators and her crew would become paste against the bulkheads.

"Angwar, do you really believe that Julie doesn't have anything to do with this?"

She held his gaze just long enough to see the doubt in her Provost's eyes.

"She'll be binding herself a year early."

"I know, Angwar."

Her voice could not disguise her worry, and she forced the fear for Julie back down into her gut, sealing it away for now.

"She could lose herself Angwar. Her Gift may be ready, but she hasn't been taught the rest. Julie won't be ready for the bonding."

Emie was silent for a moment, picturing the young woman who had come to mean so very much to her. Then the First Guardian was back, and she felt her face harden. Her Provost noticed it too, and he straightened unconsciously. Glancing towards him, she flicked a hand towards the communication station, already sinking deeper into the bond between herself and her ship self.

"See if you can raise them again."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Chapter Twenty-Two

"We've got to get out of here!"

"Really? You don't say?"

"Craig, I'm not joking here!"

Senior Technician Craig Soron glared at the human technician next to him. Since he glared at everyone, she didn't take too much notice and kept right on running down the seemingly never-ending corridor.

"Erin, listen to me, we'll be fine just as long as we get to the cross over to the shipyard before the Gravitic Drives come online."

"Oh yeah? And if we don't?"

Craig just grimaced at that and pushed himself to run a bit faster. The two of them had been at fusion three, working on a stubborn magnetic bottle when all the systems that had been powered down, began powering up. It had taken a moment of frantic attempts to contact someone, anyone, over the suddenly non-functional com system, before Craig had recognized what was going on. He was a Tiri, one of the many who were teaching the seemingly horde of eager humans in the art of zero-g construction techniques.

He'd been a construction worker on ships since he was barely old enough to shave, and had worked on Guardian Ships more than once. He'd never been onboard one when a Guardian was bonding, but he had heard stories.

There was a very good reason that no one other than a medical team was onboard when a Guardian bonded. The sometimes-random activation of systems and equipment was bad enough, but anyone who inadvertently interfered with the bonding process by activating a system by them could lead to the death of the Guardian who was bonding. The whole process, as far as Craig could remember, would last for anywhere from an hour to half a day, depending on the Guardian.

Now as long as they could get to one of the walkways, which connected Alpha to the shipyard before the ship's Gravitic Drive finished powering up, they could get off. He glanced towards Erin, slightly ahead of him, her longer legs eating up the deck faster than his; she was a good kid, a bit green, but learning quick. She was one of a breed, these humans were impressive, they would work for nearly sixteen hours, go to sleep for eight or so, and then get up and do it all over again. He rather heavily suspected that the only reason that they were anywhere near on schedule with all the ships, orbital forts, and thousands of other things which had to be built, was due to the simple fact that these humans didn't understand what was and was not impossible.

"Crap."

"Yeah."

Tugging on his tool belt he scowled at the closed airlock ahead of them. The connecting walkway had been sealed off, and probably retracted on the other side. They'll probably be pushing us out of the shipyard as soon as they can to avoid the drives ripping apart the shipyard. Gnawing at a fingernail, he muttered to himself, aware that Erin was waiting somewhat impatiently for him to come up with something resembling a plan.

"Ok, come on. They'll be evacuating whomever they can from the shuttle docks I bet. We'll go down and board one."

There had only been a few dozen people onboard, since the ship was, by and large, finished. Just the problem-shooting groups getting her ready for her maiden flight and the ship builder's trials.

Erin simply nodded and ran with him. They didn't dare use the lifts, which left the emergency access hatches and stairs. It was more than twelve decks, and it took them fifteen minutes of

running, checking shuttle docks as they went, before they found one of the airlocks with something docked to it.

The two of them pulled up in front of one of the shuttle docks. Unlike the shuttle and fighter bay's, these exterior docks were spread throughout the ship for emergency rescue, along with escape pods. They were basically little more than exterior airlocks through which shuttles, and other craft, could latch onto the ship and dock. This was the fifth shuttle dock that they had come across, and Craig had started to get a bit nervous. It wouldn't take the Gravitic Drives much longer to come online.

The indicator light above the inner airlock burned green, indicating something had docked to the outside.

"Finally, come on Craig, here we go."

"Yeah, yeah, I see it."

He grumbled and wiped a bit of sweat off his craggy forehead, sending a glare towards the tall brunette. Not that she had been affected by his glares for the last two months anyway though.

"Hope it's a passenger shuttle, Erin, then we can get out of here in style."

Erin eyed him at that, as they stood before the airlock, waiting for it to finish cycling through their rescuers.

"What is it with you and passenger shuttle's? Every time we get shipped around you go off about how you hope it's a passenger shuttle. You get laid in one of those or something?"

"Hey, now listen to me, I like..."

His words trailed off as the heavy battle steel inner door of the airlock unlocked and slid open after a soft beep to alert those on the inside that it had finished cycling. Squinting, he eyed the men inside and the interior of the craft behind them. The weapons that they were holding weren't Imperial, and the long cylinder's that the one's in the craft were working on weren't either, nor was the craft itself.

"Hey! You're not..."

The high-pitched screech of a neural disrupter firing cut him off. The last thing he ever saw was Erin's face contorted in pain as her nervous system self destructed, and then that pain washed over him as well.

When the darkness came, he welcomed it, and knew no more.

The figures began carrying the rather heavy warheads inside, and deeper into the ship. To destroy the entire ship, the warheads would have to be placed near the reactors, and along the center of the five-kilometer long ship. They ignored the still twitching bodies of the technicians.

Julie was floating through a wonderful dream world. A place where her senses were magnified a thousand fold and she could sense everything around her. Her skin was battle steel armor, and she pulsed with the energy of three fusion reactors. A place inside of her, that she had not even known existed, was filled and content. This was what she had been missing all these years.

A part of her rejoiced in this new body, swimming through the hundreds of kilometers of solid-state electronics and crystal conductors. It reveled in the information stored in the computer cores, a near limitless resource of information and wisdom from both the Tiri and Humanity. The combined knowledge and history of both races, together, and she knew she could lose herself in that knowledge. It would be so easy to slip ever deeper into this new body, to wander its length and breadth, and absorb these new sensations.

She had been dead, and now was alive.

Yet...

And yet...

Something was missing.

No, not something, someone.

Her mind paused; even as she felt the links which bound her old body to this new one continue to solidify.

Her soul ached for one more thing to be completed. The perfection of this new body, with its sleek deadly edges and intent was hard to ignore. It whispered to her with a Siren's call, and she felt herself, what made herself unique, her identity, begin to fray around the edges as she sank even deeper into it.

A memory stopped her.

Emily, laughing during the dinner with her father on Mars, her eyes sparkling in the light as she joked. Those same eyes, shadowed with concern on Earth after the attack at PAFB. The feel of her lips pressed against Emie's when they kissed, so soft and warm. Waking up, together, and holding one another while talking like the lovers that they were not yet.

She was what Julie was missing.

Emily would complete her; soothe the last part of her soul that was empty.

The lure of the bond paled in comparison to the warmth she had found with the older First Guardian. Still, Julie was not strong enough to pull away from the bond, not yet.

Emily was nearby though; Julie could feel her presence, like a distant echo at the edge of her senses.

Something nudged her, slowly pushing her out of the place where her new body had been built. If it were a hint, she would take it. This body did not have legs to move upon, but it had something so much better. She could fly.

Emily was nearby, and she would find her, and be complete.

Mary worked frantically, the pieces of her latest project spread out across the floor next to where Julie's body was laying. She'd been the best in the computer and quite good in the mechanical engineering classes during Guardian Training. Now to put her money where her mouth was, so to speak.

"Come on, come on, I know this should work."

Muttering she rummaged through her pockets, finally coming up with a half dozen hairpins, among various other odds and ends. *And they always ribbed me about being a pack rat.*

Gone was the multicolored hair, and nails. Her normal pale brown color had been allowed to grow back, and she'd taken to actually having at least a sort of a hairstyle these last few weeks. At least she still had her piercing though.

Carefully Mary attached the small capacitor that she had been planning on using to power the computer when it was done. Now she had a slightly different use for the carry on sack full of components that she had bought.

"Ugh, come on, why won't you work! You should work!"

The spread out components steadily ignored her demands, and stubbornly remained silent. She didn't dare try to use her Gift, not with Julie going through bonding right next to her. They had told them, during training, how tricky the actual bonding process could be.

In desperation she resorted to the last resort of any true technician and slapped the stubborn equipment.

"Yes! Ha, gotcha."

Carefully she adjusted the small communications device, crossed her fingers, and began transmitting.

"Hello, can anyone hear me? This is Guardian Trainee Mary Eilsen, aboard the experimental ship, Alpha. Does anyone read me?"

The Lieutenant at the com station frowned as she studied the read out on the display at her station. There was a low level signal being transmitted from Alpha. It was most definitely not on any Fleet channel, and she had to make a few adjustments to pick it up, when she did, she let out a yelp of surprise. Feeling the blood immediately rush to her cheeks as she felt everyone on the bridge look her way.

"Um. Ma'am, I have something."

Emily resisted, barely, the urge to simply take over the entire communications bay through her ship link by pure force of will. There were protocols to be followed, and reasons for those protocols.

"Put it on."

"Yes, Ma'am, it's on a very low band frequency, and it's going to be fuzzy."

That said, the com tech put the signal on audio and Mary's more than slightly fuzzy voice carried across the Command Deck.

"...Trainee Mary Eilsen, onboard the Imperial experimental ship, Alpha. Does anyone read me? I repeat, this is Guardian Trainee Mary Eilsen, does anybody hear me, please God, someone answer?"

"Com, can we send?"

"Working on it, Ma'am, it's on an odd frequency, and I don't know... ok, you're on, Ma'am."

The shipyard had finished nudging Alpha out of her construction slip, very carefully Emily was pleased to note. If they had even jarred the ship a little, the First Guardian would have sent the Major to Pluto. Alpha's Gravitic Drives were coming online and Emily began an emergency deceleration in order not to overshoot the ship.

"Mary? This is Emily, can you hear me?"

There was a long pause, and just when Emily was about to tell the com Lieutenant to recheck her modifications, Mary's voice came over the crackling channel.

"First Guardian? Thank God! You have to get over here, Julie's bonding with the ship I think, and she's having what look like mini seizures."

Emily spared a bit of her attention towards helping the com tech stabilize the signal, doing her best to make certain that they wouldn't lose Mary's signal. Another part of her was monitoring the inertial compensators, while a third part kept watch over the Gravitic Drives, and yet a fourth part of her consciousness was keeping an eagle's eye view on Alpha while it's Gravitic Drives became operational. A glance towards her Provost showed that he was already notifying the medical team standing by inside of the first drop ship of the Guardian Trainee's condition.

"Mary, we're on our way. Do not touch her, don't disturb Julie in anyway shape or form, do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I think we're moving, the Gravitic Drives are online, I think anyway. It's hard to tell with all the random information that's being displayed on all the control panels."

They were close enough for an active scan finally, and instead of relying on her passive sensor suite, Emily started a detailed scan of Alpha. Her eyebrow's raising slightly in surprise as the ship began moving towards her. It wasn't anything even close to the ship's maximum speed, but Alpha was definitely moving. The ship that a Guardian was bonding to did not usually actually move during the bonding process, usually that was. It was not unheard of for the Guardian ship to power up its Gravitic Drives, but it was unheard of for a bonding Guardian to be able to direct her or his ship self to move during the process.

"You are moving, Mary, but we'll be there in another..."

A quick recalculation of the converging vectors, and Emily realized she was going to overshoot the Alpha. They would have to come back around after slowing to a complete stop relative to Mars.

"... four minutes."

"Alright, the tremors are starting to pass I think, and Julie's looking a bit better."

"Good, now just sit tight and wait for..."

The First Guardian trailed off as her sensors picked up something that should not have been there on the flank of the prototype ship. It was, at first glance, an Imperial shuttle docked to one of the exterior shuttle docks. The power readings were a tad odd though, and Emily took a closer look at that shuttle, bringing her ship self's formidable sensor suite to bear on it.

Her face paled as her active sensor's penetrated the holographic cloak that was around the supposed shuttle.

"Mary, can you manually lock down the Command Deck?"

"The blast doors? Sure, I guess."

Came the rather puzzled response after a second of silence.

"Do it. There is a Bak'ra infiltration shuttle docked to Alpha. Seal yourself into the command deck, and then let me know when you're done."

Mary knew an order when she heard one and set to work manually cranking shut the huge armored blast doors, which closed the two entrances to the command deck.

"Yes, Ma'am."

Even as Mary answered, the snarling klaxons, which sent the crew to battle stations, sprang to life inside of North Star. You would have to be a dead person to ignore that sound, and North Star's crew of nearly nine thousand sprang into action.

"Angwar, make certain that the Marine's understand that they are going to be boarding a ship with a Guardian still bonding. She's accelerating towards us, so we're going to overshoot, and have to come back around. Tell them that they cannot interrupt any of the ship's systems."

"You know they aren't going to be happy about that, not when they'll be facing Bak'ra over there."

"Tough."

Angwar hid a sigh and went to make certain that the Marine's understood the situation, quite certain that they were not going to like what he was about to tell them. Emily didn't envy her Provost at the moment, but she had more important matters to deal with. Closing her eyes, she again sank deeper into her bond with her ship self. Once more desperately trying to get a response from Julie, repeatedly hailing her, as the two ships headed towards one another.

The results were not what Emie had been hoping for, instead of getting a response from Julie, her sensor's detected gravity bands shimmering into existence along the broadsides of the Alpha.

"Shit."

Her whisper must have been louder than she thought, since Angwar was looking at her with concern when she opened her eyes.

"The Alpha's shields just came online."

That was enough of an explanation for her Provost to understand the frustrated tone to his Guardian's words. With the broadside shields spun up, there was no way for a drop ship, or any other ship for that matter, to dock with the ship. Any ship which wanted to launch fighters, or recover them, had to drop its shields, at least for a little while.

"Tell the drop ship to stand by, we'll pass them in another two minutes, and then take another five minutes after that to come to a stop, and catch up with the Alpha."

Closing her eyes before she had even finished speaking, she focused her attention on the ship which Julie was bonding to, redoubling her efforts to get a response from her friend. She was running the danger of distracting the redhead by hailing her, which could have disastrous consequences, but they had to get those shields down.

Come on Julie, please, just answer me.

She had not noticed them until they were nearly inside of her number two fusion core.

Her attention had been elsewhere, learning the Gravitic Drives by feel and sense.

Now though, as they tried to override her security blast door and enter one of her three fusion cores, she focused on them. She observed them from every angle, and from a myriad of internal sensors. The twelve thermonuclear megaton-yield warheads were noted with detached interest. Without thought, she compared the readings from those twelve to readings in her data banks.

Bak'ra.

Twelve of them.

Inside of her ship self.

Two of them outside of her number Three-fusion core.

Ten more spread throughout the ship in pairs, each with a thermonuclear warhead.

The reaction was primal, instantaneous, and without conscious thought.

Fear, as the small part of her mind that was not taken over by the bonding process understood what they were doing, and what they wanted to accomplish.

All of her defensive systems activated almost as one. Klaxons rang out throughout the mostly empty Guardian ship, and her shields came online.

Urgent alerts were sent to her security stations, all of which were empty. The service robots that her crew and her would have used to repair hull damage were not there yet, and her attempts to get them to head towards the invaders went unanswered as well.

Fear began to slowly give way to panic.

As if in a distance she could hear her name being called, but she was too busy thwarting the invaders attempts to enter her core. Again and again she easily disabled their attempts at overriding her door controls.

After the sixth attempt though, they changed tactics. Julie watched as they headed down the corridor. Projecting their path, the panic ate at the edges of her mind.

They were headed towards her.

"First Guardian?"

Emily snarled in frustration as she failed, again, to get an answer from Julie. The two ships had passed one another, and now North Star was once more accelerating, giving chase after the experimental ship.

"Yes, Mary?"

"I closed one of the blast doors, but the other slammed shut on its own."

The First Guardian stiffened at that, trying to figure out what that meant.

"Julie might know that they are onboard, and is trying to keep them from hurting her. Mary, she's raised her shields, and we can't risk trying to disable them from here. I'll keep trying to raise her, but incase I can't, you have to start trying to lower the shields from the bridge. Don't do anything yet, I'm just warning you might have to try."

"Yes, Ma'am."

The teenager sounded less than thrilled at that prospect.

"Stand by."

Emily once more closed her eyes, and sunk even deeper into her bond, ignoring her command deck entirely. Sending images, pleas, and even promises had not worked so far. The First Guardian was positive that she was going to hear all about this from the other Guardians in system, since all of them would hear her not so subtle messages. At the moment she didn't care.

They could think whatever they wanted to, she had more important concerns at the moment.

She's afraid, and she's still bonding. I need to get her attention, and get her to lower those shields to get the drop ship over there. Now how do I do that without distracting her from the bonding process?

Mentally gritting her teeth she forced her thoughts to slow down and focus on the problem at hand. Ignoring the thoughts that were swirling around her, images of Julie, a memory of the first time she had seen her in that restaurant in Quebec, the feeling of her lips pressed against her own.

Maybe... maybe that's it. That's how to reach her.

It was quite possibly the hardest thing she had done in her life. Facing the Bak'ra in battle was easy compared to what she was attempting to do now. Opening a channel, one of many, she began broadcasting.

They were at the entrance to where her other self was now, the two of them who had been down near Fusion three. They were attempting to force the doors, and the part of her that was still Julie was startled to notice that they were actually making headway in cutting through the security

doors. The panic gripped her again, and she found solace in the strengthening bond between her and her ship self. Still something was missing, something she was forgetting about.

Then she heard it, more like sensed it, gradually at first, caressing the edge of her awareness.

It whispered to her soul, calling her back from the edge of the pit once more. Gently, Julie became aware of the sensation that called to her from beyond her ship self. Instinctively, she recognized the source as coming from Emie, and Julie felt a smile spread across her body's face.

It was not a normal communication, but a combination of sensations wrapped together. Excitement, joy, contentment, desire, all combined together with a sense of love. It wrapped around her, calming the panic that had grown inside of her, and drawing her far enough out of the bond to think.

Emie?

The sense of relief was nearly overpowering, and the sensation of being hugged flowed across from the First Guardian.

Julie. Please, you have to lower the shields. Hurry up and I'll be right over there.

A thin stream of smoke curled upwards from the inside of the command deck blast doors.

Emie, they're burning into the Command Deck!

Julie, listens to me, please love, lower the shields.

There was a long pause and Julie found her entire being focused on one thought.

You love me?

What could have been a curse came over the link.

Julie, I swear to you we will talk about this later, now just lower the shields!

Basking in the admission, Julie absently did as her love, *she loves me*, had asked.

The second they were down Emily opened her eyes and pointed towards Angwar.

"Send them! The shields are down."

Angwar nodded and leaned over to relay the orders down to the drop ship shuttle bay. The four drop ships launched a moment later, and sped towards the Alpha, which North Star had matched its velocity to earlier.

Julie, I'm on my way, hang on.

Emily was up and moving the second after she sent the message, and gestured towards the stand by helmsmen.

"Go to manual, I'm going over there."

Angwar managed to intercept her halfway to the blast doors.

"First Guardian."

"Angwar, get out of my way."

Her voice was low and dangerous, and she gave him high points for the look of fear that entered his eyes.

"According to Imperial Fleet regulation, 7.30, it is my duty as Provost to formally object to any action that would place you in avoidable risk."

Emily also gave herself high points for avoiding grabbing the front of her Provost's uniform and shaking him. Taking a deep breath she narrowed her eyes.

"Julie is in trouble, and I am going over there. Your objection is noted."

She ducked around him, and her long legs carried her towards the security doors and the lift beyond, her black hair sailing behind her as it came loose from the ponytail she had hastily put it into.

Angwar cursed and had to nearly sprint to keep up.

"First Guardian..."

She spun around outside of the security doors and snarled, her blue eyes deathly serious.

"Don't make me hurt you, Angwar. Julie needs me, and I'm going over. Got it?"

Not even her Provost was suicidal and he cautiously took a step backwards, away from the darkness that briefly looked out at him from her eyes.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Good."

Then she turned and headed into the lift, and was gone with her Honor Guard. The lift trip down to the nearest shuttle hanger seemed to go on forever, and Emily ground her teeth in frustration. The deadly cold glare she focused on the lift doors, and the anger which rolled off her in waves, forced even the armored Marine's to keep away from her.

They were almost through the blast doors when they detected the ship's shields go down. That meant that their presence here had been detected. The odds had shifted, it was time to leave and take what they could with them. It would only be a matter of time before the Imperial Marines arrived. The thermonuclear weapons had been difficult to obtain, and the infiltration shuttle was a valuable piece of equipment. The returns were now outweighed by the risks.

They left the doors, and along with the others began to return to the shuttle. They would still be able to escape from this, and once far enough merge with the normal traffic.

Two of the warheads had already been set.

They would be enough to at least cripple the ship.

Emily was on her way, Julie kept repeating that, over and over, in her mind. The bond had begun to pull at her once more, luring her with a seductive ease that she was almost afraid of. Some part of her knew, instinctively, that if she gave into the pull to go even deeper, she would never return.

Even distracted by what was going on as she was, a part of her noticed when the Bak'ra began moving once more. All of them headed back towards the external shuttle dock. So, Emily had scared them into running?

They had killed, her sensor's indicated, fourteen technicians who had been on board her.

Fourteen people who had been onboard of her ship self.

Fourteen of HER crew.

A surge of anger coursed through her, and she could feel herself reaching out to where her weapons should have been. The missile magazines were empty though, and she snarled. None of her internal security systems were operational either.

Four of the Bak'ra had reached the shuttle when she realized what she could do. If she had been thinking clearly before, she would have realized it earlier. The shuttle itself she had no control over, but that was her dock.

She felt a smile that nothing to do with humor form over her body's face.

The inner airlock door slid shut, and she began to vent the atmosphere from inside of the airlock itself. The four Bak'ra on the ship were forced to seal their inner door as well, or be exposed to vacuum. A Bak'ra assault trooper could withstand vacuum, but not an infiltrator, for they were quite nearly as vulnerable as a human.

Blast doors across her ship self slammed down, slowing down the Bak'ra who still remained onboard. Her sensors were detecting the approaching Imperial drop ships, and she knew Emie was near.

Her heart was near.

Julie's thoughts of Emily were shoved aside as the Bak'ra, evidently coming to the opinion that they should cut their losses, tore away from her side. The pain as bits of her hull were torn away with the shuttle as it boosted, rippled through the newly formed bond, and on the Command Deck Mary watched fearfully as Julie's breathing hitched.

How dare they.

Kill my crew.

Invade my body.

Attempt to destroy me.

The anger followed the pain, and she snarled wordlessly. Her missile magazines were empty. The plasma launchers had not been powered up, and would take too long. Her frustration built as the shuttle boosted away from her. North Star was not far behind her now, and the Bak'ra might not be able to escape.

But they might be able to.

She wanted them.

They had killed her crew, and the primal urge to protect them welled up inside of her.

With another wordless snarl she watched in frustration as the shuttle raced ahead of her. There was nothing she could do, they would leave plasma launcher range before the launchers were charged, and without missile's...

Wait.

She was in Alpha.

Her lips curled upwards as she reached out and stroked a part of her ship self that she had unknowingly powered up with the Gravitic Drive's.

They were well on the way to escaping. The experimental ship did not have any missiles to reach them, and they would leave Plasma Launcher range shortly. North Star was launching fighters, but they had a good chance of evading those once they entered the shuttle traffic and engaged the holographic cloak.

So it was with a bit of surprise that they watched the front Gravitic bow wave of the Alpha drop, and read a power spike.

There was no logical reason for that to happen, and the four Bak'ra were puzzled. Still, it meant that the pursuing Guardian ship slowed even further, and the distance between them and it increased.

The gravity lance, which fired from the front of the hammerhead ship, tore the infiltration shuttle apart. The gravity sheer simply disintegrated the small vessel, shredding it and its components down to the molecular level.

The very first firing of a Gravitic Lance from a type Fourteen Variant Guardian Class Ship was marked by a transmission from Alpha, across all channels. It was relayed throughout the inner solar system, only contained by the sensor sphere located at a distance from the sun as the asteroid belt. No one could miss the birthing cries of the first Human Guardian.

Die you sons of bitches.

Mary was tossed from her feet as the shockwave rippled through the ship, gravity failed for a moment immediately afterwards. Cursing she hauled herself up from where she had fallen after gravity reestablished itself, and whimpered at the pain from her wrist, which she was pretty sure she had snapped when she got tossed that last time. The lights had gone out for a moment as well, and a few of the stations around the Command Deck had shorted out by the power surge.

A quick glance at the engineering station showed crimson lights indicating damage spreading across most of the port side of the ship. A groan drew her attention towards Julie, and she rushed to her friend's side.

Trickles of blood spread from the red head's nostrils, and her breathing was erratic. Even as she reached her side, it seemed to Mary that Julie's breathing was becoming more and more erratic, and her face was a deathly pale shade.

"Julie, hold on, please just hold on. Emily is on her way, please just hold on!"

The detonation of two nuclear warheads followed the screamed transmission from Julie. Emily slumped against the inner wall of the lift as her sensors showed her the twin detonations, blossoming outwards from the flanks of Alpha. The ship's drive's died immediately, and fear grew in her as she watched power levels fluctuate across the ship.

Dear Maker, Julie is linked to that, still bonding.

The trip from the lift to the shuttle bay, and from the bay to Alpha was done in silence as well. Emily barely acknowledged the presence of the eight other Marines who went with her on the shuttle; each of which stayed wisely silent on the trip over to Alpha and the docking procedure. The only sound during the ride was the quiet voices of the pilot and copilot as they matched velocity with Alpha and carefully docked.

Emily kept her thoughts focused on the ship they were approaching, and dared not think about what they would find when they reached it.

Two more Marines in full battle gear were waiting for her when they had completed docking procedures at one of the exterior docks. There was no crew onboard to guide the shuttle into one of the interior bays, so they docked as close to the command deck as they could manage. The twelve Honor Guard Marines went first, and even Emily could not alter that.

As they moved, ignoring the lifts, the Captain, again insanely young to be a Captain at least to the First Guardian, who had met them filled them in on the situation.

"We had a running battle with the twelve Bak'ra, who thankfully only had light armor and weapons. Three of my men were hit by neural disruptor fire, but we got them treatment quick enough and they should recover. An explosive device that had been left behind at the blast doors onto the command deck killed another four. Guardian Trainee Eilsen was able to open the doors manually for us, and we secured the Command Deck."

He paused as the group of them descended through access ways towards the core of the ship, ignoring the lifts.

"The Guardian had gone into shock, and the medical team was doing its best to stabilize her condition when I left to escort you in. All twelve Bak'ra have been accounted for, along with the nuclear weapons. Fourteen dead fleet personnel have also been found."

He received what sounded like a grunt in return for his efforts, and the First Guardian broke into a jog as she spotted the half open command deck blast doors ahead of them. Power fluctuations were still occurring throughout the ship. The fear had become a band of terror, tightening around her chest.

Please Maker, let her be all right. Please...

Mary met her just as she swept inside, clutching to her hand as Emily's face tightened spotting the gaggle of medical staff, which were clustered, around the Guardian Station. Her wrist was in a splint, Emie vaguely noticed.

"She isn't breathing."

It had been a pleasant dream, and Julie did her best to fight the call of consciousness. She had been dreaming of Emily holding her hand and talking to her, even though Julie herself hadn't been talking at all. That had been a bit of an odd part, and she frowned slightly, not opening her eyes quite yet, on the edge between dreamscapes and the reality of the day. The Guardian Trainee remembered the near love in her friend's voice, and the frown that had been on her face smoothed out into a small grin. That love had wrapped itself around her like a warm, fuzzy blanket, in which Julie had willingly sought shelter.

Sleep, as it had a wont to do, slowly slipped away and she gradually became more aware of her surroundings. Her mouth, she realized, tasted like something had crawled inside of it and died.

That realization was quickly followed by the fact that she could feel the ship that surrounded her. Instinctively, she knew where she was, in the Guardian's ready quarters, located just off of the Command Deck; that and that she was not alone.

Cracking open an eyelid, she surveyed the room, green eyes taking in the rather depressingly stark furnishings. The bed that she was stretched out on, little more than a large cot, had company in the form of a nearby chair, and that was just about it. The quiet hum of the life support systems was barely noticeable, and the only other noise in the room was Emie's quiet breathing. She didn't particularly care though, as the sight of the occupant of that lone chair caught her attention.

Emily had fallen asleep in the rather uncomfortable looking chair, her feet, sans boots, were propped up on the edge of the cot, and her head was tilted backwards at an uncomfortable angle. Her uniform jacket was half open, revealing the white dress shirt underneath, and her black hair look disheveled.

She was the most beautiful thing that Julie had ever seen.

The redhead carefully edged her way into a sitting position, after spending a quiet few minutes just watching the First Guardian sleep. It was a first, and she took her time taking a good long look at the tall woman. Her cheeks were classically sculpted, if a bit drawn after the stress of the past few months. Dark rings under her eyes attested to the fatigue Emie must have felt to fall asleep in such an odd position.

Julie had been trying to reach for the pitcher of what she hoped was water that was on the floor next to Emily's chair, trying not to wake up her sleeping friend. Unfortunately, her limbs weren't quite responding exactly as she wanted to commands from her mind, and she started to slide, rather ungracefully, off the bed and towards the floor. Wincing in preparation for the thud, she closed her eyes.

Which flew open again a second later when she realized she hadn't hit the floor, and that a pair of warm hands were lifting her, easily, back up and onto the bed. Blue eyes, which had no right being that blue, looked at her with amusement as Emily helped her get settled back into the covers.

"If you wanted some water, you just had to ask."

"Sorry, didn't want to wake you up, and I was thirsty."

Julie gratefully took the offered glass of water and drank greedily, surprisingly thirsty.

"Hey, slow down, don't drink so fast. Your stomach might not be ready to handle it so fast."

The bed shifted slightly as Emily took a seat on the edge and Julie was aware of being studied as she slowed her gulps to sips, through sheer willpower.

"You ok? You looked really tired."

The question, unexpectedly, got a laugh out of the First Guardian, and Julie found herself suddenly gathered up in a near bone-crushing hug.

"Am I Ok? What a question. Don't you ever scare me that much again."

Julie barely heard her words, getting more than a little distracted by the warm breath tickling her earlobe.

"Me?"

Suddenly serious blue eyes regarded her as Emily pulled back enough to study her face.

"What do you remember of the last few days?"

"What?"

"Humor me, what do you remember?"

Julie scrunched up nose in thought and frowned as she couldn't remember anything after the tour.

"We were on a tour of Alpha..."

"And then?"

"Umm... I don't know. What happened?"

Emily took her hand and laced their fingers together, which brought a near instant smile to the younger woman's face.

"You bonded, a year ahead of time I might add, and to an experimental ship. Congratulations on being the first human Guardian, by the way."

"WHAT?"

The redhead immediately regretted the near shout, her head feeling distinctly as if she had just been on a binger to end all bingers.

"What?"

She tried again at a more normal level. Emily silently fished a pill out of her pocket and handed it over, which Julie swallowed down with a sip of water without question.

"Well?"

She demanded, when no further information was forthcoming from the dark-haired Guardian.

"Try thinking past the last thing you remember on the tour. Do you remember the Guardian's station? The Bak'ra coming onboard while you were bonding? The two warheads?"

"Bonding? What... OH!"

Green eyes slowly widened as the memories, the dreams had not been dreams. That explained the ache she felt through her bond, and her body.

"Oh."

"Yes, that's right, Oh."

Feeling her cheeks turn red, Julie risked a glance through her lashes towards the other woman.

"So you love me, huh?"

It was Emily's turn to look more than a little panicked, and she looked everywhere but towards Julie.

"Well, I... um, had to get your attention."

"Hmmhm?"

Ignoring the near terror she remembered feeling when she realized there were Bak'ra onboard, she moved closer towards the woman sitting just a few feet away from her. Moving closer until her lips just barely brushed the First Guardian's cheek.

"And you couldn't figure out any other way than transmitting the way you feel about me to everyone inside of the sensor shield?"

Blue eyes flittered close, as Julie's lips nipped across her neck and found an earlobe to nibble on.

"It seemed like the best idea at the ... umm... oh... time."

"Do you know..." she tugged on the earlobe, enjoying the taste of her friend's skin, and whispering into her ear, "...how nice that was?"

"Very nice."

Holding back a sudden desire to laugh, Julie proceeded to show Emily exactly what she thought of that, and how she felt about it, by kissing the dark haired woman until they were both breathless.

"I ah, thanks."

"Thanks?"

Julie grinned and bumped her forehead against Emily's with a sudden smile.

"Yes, for what you did, and said. It goes both ways."

The confusion in the tall woman's eyes faded and she smiled brightly. It transformed her entire face, and Julie found herself pulled in, a call she did not resist.

"Good."

This time it was Emily who started the kiss, and Julie let herself be swept away on the tide of emotions that warm, soft touch sent spiraling through her. The gentle kiss progressed from slow, loving kisses to hungry, open-mouthed, and passionate. They were both too tired for more, and slowly, as if by an unspoken agreement, they reduced the intensity.

"Sleep with me?"

Startled blue eyes met hers and Julie nearly laughed, nearly.

"Just to sleep, you look exhausted, and we're not ready for anything more."

And I want to have your complete attention when we do more.

Nodding, Emily laid down next to her, waiting as Julie tucked herself up against her side.

"Sleep sounds good. You scared me you know."

"I'm sorry."

Something in her tone made the younger Guardian look up. Seeing the worried look in her Emie's eyes, Julie hugged her tight.

"I'm alright, the Bak'ra didn't manage anything."

"It wasn't just the Bak'ra, although they are a worry. The team that was onboard your ship self, which you now get to name by the way, wasn't from the evacuation. That means they got to Earth some other way, especially with that infiltration shuttle that they had."

The information on the Bak'ra was worrisome, but that wasn't what caught her attention.

"What do you mean, not just the Bak'ra?"

Emily's arms tightened around her and Julie gladly rested her head against the older woman's chest.

"You were a year early bonding. You didn't finish your training for the bonding, and you didn't know how to direct the bonding itself; it's quite a shock. The Tiri lost a lot of Gifted individuals when we first started having Guardians. Your body went into shock, and we nearly lost you. Twice."

Julie didn't stop to think, just followed her instincts as she heard the fear in her voice. Propping herself up she gently kissed her friend, showing her that she was still there.

"I'm alright."

"Yeah. Don't you dare do that to me again, remember, you promised."

With a grin, she sank back down onto the bed, using the dark-haired woman as a pillow. *A very nice pillow that I could get used to very easily, oh, who are you kidding, you want this all the time.*

"We have time to figure out where those other Bak'ra came from. After all we've got, what, three and a half years left?"

"Two."

Emily looked up in shock at that.

"Two?"

Serious blue eyes returned the look, and Emily nodded gravely.

"We picked up a transmission, yesterday, from a long range-scanning outpost in the W'essi system. If they continue ignoring the side systems like they appear to be doing, they're new search pattern will bring them here in two years."

"Are we going to be ready?"

The silence was her answer, and Julie sighed, hugging the First Guardian again.

"We'll manage it somehow, Emie."

The chuckle that reverberated under her ear caught Julie by surprise, and she grinned instinctively in response.

"With human kind working together, or at least kind of trying to, we have a shot at least."

The starlight, brilliant here in orbit around Mars, was the only light in the room, and the two of them rested there, watching those stars, from which the darkness was coming for all of mankind. It would be here sooner than they expected, but they would fight it with everything that they had,

with everything that they were. Because, everything else set aside, despite, or perhaps because of, its sporadic suicidal impulses, human kind had always fought to survive.

"Emie?"

"Hmm?"

"I have a name, for my ship self."

"What?"

"How does Southern Cross sound to you?"

The End

The sequel to this story is [Southern Cross](#).
