

~ Southern Cross ~

by Windstar

Disclaimer: This is the sequel to another story, called [North Star](#). It's probably a very good idea to read that one first, or this might not make any sense at all. Heck, it may not even make sense if you've read that first! It has romantic situations between two women. If that disturbs you, there are lots of other stories out there.

A very large thank you to all of you who sent me feed back on North Star. You all helped inspire the muse on this one. Sorry it took so long to get this started, but I had some problems with the beginning (restarted it three times) and real life got in the way for a while. Hope you all enjoy the ride! Comments and constructive criticism are very welcome at: adarkbow@yahoo.com

Prologue

Three hundred light years from Earth, in a system the Tiri called Outlander, for it had once been the farthest any Tiri vessel had ever traveled outwards from the Galactic Core of the galaxy, space rippled. The solar system was not much to look at, a fairly average yellow sun, midway through its expected lifetime. Four planets, two rocky balls far too close to the sun to hold any liquid water, and further out, two massive gas giants, several times the size of the planet known to humans as Jupiter. Past them, beyond the limit for warp gate drives, space rippled and was torn apart as dozens, and then hundreds, of artificial wormholes were formed.

The ships, which slid out of the warp gates looked almost organic; as if they had been grown instead of built. They shook themselves out, cautiously, methodically, each ship sliding into preordained positions. Smaller ships swam about the massive four-kilometer long ships, which had opened the warp gates. More and more gates opened, and before long, the entire Bak'ra fleet had finished transition.

Lortal watched it impassively, noting here and there where ships made minute errors, or where a warp gate opened a bit closer to the gathering fleet than it should have. A warp gate was not something one wanted opening on top of one's ship. A servant clone walked past him, careful not to disturb the Gallor-Tal as it passed him. The small bio engineered creature had once, long ago he supposed, been Bak'ra. They were now set in their own caste, as things should be, Lortal reflected. Ignoring the hulking forms of his personal guards, also engineered, he turned towards his second.

"Any sign?"

"No, my Lord."

Thuva bowed carefully to her Lord, casting down her eyes, both artificial and real, as she stood to avoid looking at his optical scanner as was only proper. Someday she would be a Gallor as well, but she was young still, and would learn by his example.

"Tell Infiti that if he does not learn to control his ship's brain better, and opens a gate that close to us again, I shall feast on him come supper."

"Yes, my Lord."

It was a great dishonor to a clan to have had a member so offend a Gallor that they were eaten at Supper instead of a Herd member. Gallor-Tal was becoming impatient with how long it was taking them to trace the signal that had been sent. Already they had gone further than expected, and sensors had yet to detect the Tiri presence. Keeping her own optical scanner, far less elaborate than her Lord's, although that too would change with time, downcast, she spoke.

"We have two Herd members to feast upon this evening. The herd master says that they are both Tiri, and we shall feast well upon them."

Gallor-Tal Lortal felt his lips pull back in a slow smile at that. Good, Tiri tasted much better than nearly any other species that they had so far captured, at least to him. He knew that some of the others complained that the meat was too bland, but he found that the brain in particular held very subtle flavors.

"Good, tell the others we shall leave after a scan for life is completed and a report sent back to the home fleet. Before that, though, we shall eat."

Chapter One

2012, 68 years post evacuation of Tiri Prime.

Honor, Wisdom, and Strength.

Honor, that which defines who we are.

Wisdom, to give us the insight to become better.

Strength, to carry on with the battle.

~Portion of the Guardian code.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the Senate. I thank you for coming to join us today for this briefing. Behind me you can see a holographic representation of earth and its major population centers."

Stepping forwards the tall raven-haired woman gestured towards the sixty-foot diameter sphere behind her. The earth was just faintly transparent, allowing those on the other side of the large amphitheater to see the black uniformed woman as well.

"What I am about to show you is an estimate of what would happen to humanity if one of the Bak'ra bio weapons were to make it to the surface."

With a nod towards her nearby Provost, she kept her back to the holograph and continued speaking to those gathered. She already knew what would be shown behind her, she'd seen the raw data.

"Here you can see the impact of a Bak'ra missile, a single one, above Europe. The explosion would take place at an altitude of, most probably, approximately two kilometers."

Red dots began to appear across the glob behind her as she continued to speak.

"With a two week latency, the bio weapon would spread across the face of the planet before it was detected. Sixteen days after delivery, the first cases would begin to show. Eighteen days after delivery, the first fatalities would appear."

Behind her, splashes of crimson red began to spread across the continents. Spreading from the major cities outwards, seeming to devour the landmasses.

"Within twenty days the major cities are dead zones, thirty days and the majority of the country side is dead as well. We are predicting a ninety nine point five percent fatality rate among those infected, if the Bak'ra manage to tailor it to humans as well as they did for Tiri."

The continents on the earth behind her now glowed a uniform red.

"I hope this shows you all the importance of setting up the quarantine zones and of the planetary shield. No missiles can be allowed to reach earth. Even one of them could kill the majority of the earth's population."

The amphitheater, which had been deadly silent up until that point, exploded with sound as everyone began to talk at once. Lady Emily Windstar ignored it all and strode towards the petite red head waiting for her at the nearest doorway.

"That went well."

The First Guardian grinned slightly at the tone of her friend's voice, but shook her head.

"Have I ever told you how much I hate politics?"

Julie McGrath grinned at that and ran a hand through her short red hair, striding out into the relative quiet of the corridor outside of the Senate's new meeting hall.

"Once or twice I think. Emie, are we going to be able to pull this off?"

Emie frowned at that, slowing to look at Julie and arched an eyebrow in silent question.

"This."

Julie waved her hand at the bustling activity around her, encompassing the Imperial base, and more, with that wave.

"I don't know Julie, it's going to be tight. We're getting down to the wire on this one. I promise you though, we won't go down without a fight."

Julie smiled slightly at that and followed after the taller woman.

"I never thought otherwise."

"I can't do it."

"Of course you can. Just clear your mind and rest for a few minutes, then we'll try again."

Julie McGrath let herself collapse back into the conforming acceleration couch, wiping at the sweat that coated her face. They had been at this for three hours now, and the redhead's temper was reaching its limit. The tall, lanky form strapped down in a crash seat just a few feet away from her, smiled, much to her annoyance.

"How long does this usually take to learn?"

First Guardian Lady Emily Burtin Windstar, Emie to her friends, smiled a bit wider at what Julie suspected was the aggrieved tone in her voice.

"Learning how to open your first Warp Gate is not an easy thing."

Julie blew a loose lock of hair out of her face and turned to glare at Emie. Resisting the always-present temptation to reach out and touch that beautiful body.

"You didn't answer me, how long did it take you to learn how to open your first one?"

Unbuckling the safety harness that had kept her strapped down to the acceleration couch while her ship self's Gravitic Drives were offline, Julie sat upright and wiped at the sweat on her face. The link, which bonds any Guardian to their ship self, allowed her to sense the condition of the Southern Cross's systems.

"Eight hours, but that was nearly a record."

Not sure if she wanted to think about trying to focus the Warp Gate generators into opening an artificial wormhole for the next five hours, Julie swung her legs over the edge of the couch and sat on the edge. The First Guardian had also unbuckled herself, and was leaning forward, still grinning.

Casting a quick glance around the command center, she made certain that her very recently assembled bridge crew was busy, before leaning forward.

"Oh really? And what's the usual time it takes to learn how to do this?"

The grin turned into a slow smile and Julie found herself leaning further forward even as Emily leaned toward her as well.

"Twelve hours or so, but I'm sure it won't take you that long."

"Oh really?"

"Yes. You're far too smart and beautiful to do anything normally. Like your penchant for getting into trouble."

"That wasn't my fault!"

"So you say. But you promised you would stay out of trouble, remember."

Emily surged forward, and before Julie could rebut her, stole a quick kiss. Julie had just enough time to feel the press of warm lips against her own, before Emily stood and stretched, grinning at what Julie was certain was a shocked expression on her own face.

"Come walk with me? You're Warp Gate generators need a half hour to recharge before you can try again anyway. A bit of a stretch will help."

It sounded like a good idea, and she did her best to ignore the bit of discomfort that had followed that kiss. It wasn't that she hadn't enjoyed it, her heartbeat felt like it had doubled, and her palms were sweaty. She just wasn't used to open shows of affection. Being raised by the Army since she was young probably was to blame for that. Doing her best to hide that discomfort and switch the topic to something more neutral, Julie led the way out of the meters thick blast doors which would seal off the Command deck during battle, past the Marine guards stationed outside, and then down the corridor outside to the lift. From there, it was a short trip to one of the outer decks, where she could walk near the armored view ports, and watch the star-studded void outside her hull. Emily and, now her own set of Marine Honor Guards followed along at a respectful distance.

"I need to choose a Provost soon don't I?"

"Yes, as soon as your ship self passes it's builders trials, and we return to Mars."

Ignoring the speculative glance that the taller woman was giving her as they walked, Julie returned the nods of passing crewmembers. The last month had been a whirlwind of activity, and she still felt slightly off-balance. She was a year ahead of the other gifted humans who were still studying and preparing for their own bonding with the other Guardian-Class ships being built in Mars orbit. No doubt due to the fact that she had used her gift throughout the time she had aided

Majestic. To make the situation even more complicated than it was, she had not only bonded a year earlier than expected, but had bonded to what was essentially an experimental ship. Alpha, which it had been called before she had bonded, was the first of the Human/Tiri built Guardian-Class ships to be completed.

Five kilometers long, with a new experimental weapon system located in her bow, she was a ship built for war. A hundred fighters would eventually be housed in her fighter bays, along with an even two-dozen shuttles, and even more drop ships. It was also part of her, linked to her, bonded to her soul. She knew every bulkhead, every circuit, every weapon, what made her; Julie had gone through every part of her ship self during the bonding. Three fusion power plants pulsed in her core, and the power they generated pulsed through her ship self like blood. The structural members were her bones, the battle steel armor plating, her skin. Sensors for her eyes, and ears, Gravitic Drives for movement, and a computer core to help her run the massive amounts of equipment.

After the unexpected bonding, and the Bak'ra attempts at sabotage, which had occurred at the same time, the ship had been renamed Southern Cross. Her ship self, she thought with a quick flush of pride. Other memories competed for her attention as well, the feel of waking up after her bonding, to find Emily nearby. Keeping watch on her after the almost disastrous bonding had occurred. The feel of her lips pressed against her own when they had kissed, the slightly spicy scent of the black-haired woman when she had held Julie close while they slept.

"Thinking good thoughts?"

The warm purr of Emily's voice next to her ear sent a pleasant shiver down her spine and Julie found herself smiling as she stopped next to one of the view ports.

"Yes. Just remembering waking up holding you after the bonding."

A warm arm slipped around her waist, and despite her unease at showing public displays of affection, Julie's body gladly relaxed backward into the strong arms that held her.

"I remember that too. Don't you dare ever scare me that much again."

They had told her that her heart had stopped twice, from the shock of her bonding being interrupted by the explosion of thermonuclear warheads that the Bak'ra had left onboard her. It had been a near thing, apparently, although she didn't remember a thing after turning the Bak'ra infiltration shuttle into tiny molecules using the new gravity lance located in the hammerhead-shaped bow of her ship.

"I'll try."

A crewman passed, and despite herself, she tensed until the dark blue uniform of an Imperial Navy member passed. The man, the slight frame and pale complexion indicating he was probably Tiri, passed them without more than a nod of acknowledgment for the two Guardians.

"Does this bother you so much?"

Closing her eyes, Julie concentrated on the feel of breath against the skin of her neck as the taller woman bent to whisper.

"What?"

"This."

A feather light kiss was pressed to her the skin below her neck, just as another group of crewmen passed, these were human, also dressed in fleet uniforms. They didn't even seem to notice the two Guardians, and kept right on discussing an engineering problem as they passed her. Still she pulled away, just enough for the arms around her to loosen. Her point made, Emily remained silent, watching her with those startling blue eyes in the reflection of the view port. Julie looked anywhere but back at her, trying to sort the confusing swirl of feelings that washed through her.

"I'm not used to it, that's all."

That wasn't all, but she wasn't going to ruin the moment by talking about anything else right now. A flicker of doubt spread across the taller woman's face, and when the arms around her let go, Julie felt the loss keenly. Still, she wasn't ready for the conversation that they would have to have soon.

"Emie?"

"Hmm?"

Turning around slowly, she peered up at the sad face above her.

"We're going to have to talk soon, ok? Just, not right now."

"Soon."

Forcing a small smile Julie nodded and hugged the taller woman quickly. Emotional connections had never been her greatest asset; Major Sims had been one of the few she had been able to truly call a friend throughout her years in majestic. She supposed she could call the three housemates she had gone through Guardian training with at Plattsburgh Air Force Base friends as well. Emily though, she could fall in love with, and that frightened her more than she had thought possible. Her previous relationships had been restricted to one-night stands, wherever her work for Majestic had taken her. She didn't want that with Emily, and she had no clue how to tell the First Guardian that.

"Its time to go back I guess, try again?"

Emily watched as the play of emotions flittered across the beautiful face staring up at hers. She knew that Julie would have problems with what was happening between them, she just hadn't expected them so soon.

I should have known she would have problems with emotions. The Army raised her, no wonder she looks scared. I wonder if she knows how beautiful and lost she looks right now.

Instead of voicing her thoughts, the First Guardian nodded slowly. She had the distinct impression that if she pressed the younger human that Julie would be likely to bolt. The quiet presence behind her signaled the arrival of an Ensign.

Glancing at the reflection of the impossibly young looking man in the view port, Emily could almost feel the mask of command, as she sometimes called it, settle over her features.

"What?"

Her voice was sharper than she had intended, and the Ensign flinched visibly, holding out a data pad towards her carefully.

"Messages for you First Guardian."

Julie had turned back around to study the view through that armored view port, and Emily ground her teeth as another moment alone was robbed from them. Whirling around, she snatched the pad from the outstretched hand of the Ensign and dismissed him with a wave of her hand, already scanning its contents.

In response to her grunt, Julie glanced over her shoulder, stealing Emily's attention away from the pad and its message, as the First Guardian watched the way the young Guardian's hair swirled with that move. The mask, she was vaguely aware, had not lasted more than one look from the human woman, and Emily absently wondered if Julie knew how she affected her. Heat flared in her face as she realized that Julie had just asked her a question and she had been too busy remembering how silky soft that reddish-blond hair was.

"What?"

With a much more normal smile Julie poked her in the stomach.

"I said what is it?"

Shaking her head to settle her thoughts, Emily tapped the screen of the pad and turned around, walking back towards the lift, which would take them down to the command deck.

"The swearing in ceremony for your class of Guardians is going to be in a week, at Mars Base."

"So I have a week to finish builder's trials?"

"Looks like it."

"That should be enough time, right?"

"Unless something really unusual happens, it should be."

"Is that all?"

Emie hesitated a moment then shook her head, watching the lift doors, waiting for the lift to arrive.

"No. The search for the elusive General Whittecker is going nowhere fast. Major Sims is having problems picking up his trail again. He's got one or two leads, but he doesn't sound very optimistic. As for having a week to finish builder's trials, you'll have enough time. Unless you attract more problems."

Both of them stepped inside of the lift as it arrived, and Julie punched in her authorization code to take them down to the command deck. The eight Honor Guards, four assigned to each of them, crowded in after them, silent as usual.

"Of course, with you..."

To Emily's delight, Julie poked her in the side once more and grinned up at her.

"You're never going to let me forget about that are you?"

Doing her best not to grin, Emily looked down at those shining, green eyes. She managed not to smile for all of a second, which she supposed was a personal record when it came to Julie. Somehow she had slipped right past the usual defenses Emily had learned to use to keep people far enough away from her for her to do her job.

"Nope."

The grin turned into one of the most adorable pouts that Emily had ever seen and she found herself leaning forwards to kiss that expression away.

"You're mean."

"Nope, just realistic."

Motioning for Julie to head out first, Emily followed her as they made their way back out onto the command deck, nodding in return to the salutes of the on duty guards at the entrance.

"I hope I get it this time."

The First Guardian smiled as she followed Julie over towards the Guardians crash couch located in the center of the circular command center. Taking a seat and strapping herself into the temporary chair, which had been installed next to that couch, she grinned.

"It will take as long as it takes. Don't try to rush it Julie. Just do what I told you, visualize the gravity eddies and then shift them."

"Easy for you to say."

It, of course, was not as easy as Emie had said, but it was close enough to get Julie started. Making certain that the straps were tight, Emily settled into her chair. Not that she was that surprised, but despite whatever Julie might think, she was doing a great job so far. The last attempt had nearly succeeded, and that had been only after three hours of attempts. A good hundred thousand kilometers behind them, North Star sat patiently. Waiting while the First Guardian coached the newest Guardian through her ship builder's trials.

"Easy for you to say."

Grumbling to herself, Julie finished strapping herself down in preparation for what she was about to do. Forming an artificial wormhole was not an easy proposition. No artificial intelligence had ever succeeded in what Julie was now training for. She'd heard it described a dozen different ways. Warp Gating was the basis of Tiri space travel, for without this way of circumventing the light speed barrier; no ship could have traversed the vast distances between the stars in anything even resembling a decent amount of time.

In the simplest terms, a Warp Gate was, for all intents and purposes, an artificially created wormhole. The fabric of space itself was folded in on it's self, much as one would fold a piece of paper until two points were touching on it. The shortest distance between two points, in space at least, was not a straight line, but a fold. She understood all the theory and had passed her training courses back at the Guardian Trainee facility at the old air force base in Plattsburgh New York. Still, it was one thing to understand the theory, and quite another to actually do it in the real world.

The fact that Emily was finding the entire situation amusing was not helping at all either.

"You know, you could at least pretend to be sympathetic to what I'm going through here."

That only brought a wider grin from the raven-haired First Guardian, and blue eyes danced with amusement. Strapping herself in as well, the taller woman stretched out her legs and got comfortable.

"Try not to force it so much Julie. Remember, it's as much an art as it is a science."

Muttering, Julie let her headrest back against the cushion of the couch and closed her eyes.

"An art she says, don't force it she says..."

There was something else that was an art form, and she felt her cheeks warm as she thought about doing that with Emily. The low chuckle coming from the First Guardian's direction made certain that she knew her line of thinking probably hadn't gone unnoticed. *I swear, I'm going to have to strap her down if I want to have some time alone with her like that. Hmm... that has some possibilities.*

"Relax Julie, ignore what's going on around your body. Remember, you have to be able to do this even when you're under enemy fire. Block out what's happening on the Command Deck. Let your bond strengthen, and feel your ship self. Now let the generators spin up, and activate the gravity emitters."

Julie McGrath spared a glare towards the First Guardian at that. It was easy for her to say, she'd already mastered the art and science of opening a Warp Gate. She'd only spent the last three hours or so trying to wrap her mind around what was needed. As always, the theory was different than the actual application. Letting the bond between herself and her ship deepen she relaxed against the acceleration couch.

I am not spending twelve hours learning how to open a Warp Gate. Three hours is already too long, even if Emie thinks I'm doing a good job.

Well aware of the presence of the First Guardian nearby. As her human body faded out of her consciousness, she became more and more aware of her ship self. Southern Cross was five kilometers of battle steel, life support, weapons, shields, and fusion reactors, along with the nearly four thousand crewmembers who now depended on her for life. As all Guardians did, she felt a protective surge for these people who trusted her with their lives. She was responsible for them, and their survival in the war against the Bak'ra that they were preparing for. The first time she had realized that, the short red head had been more than a little shocked.

Her senses expanded and she felt the presence of the other Guardian ship a good hundred thousand kilometers behind South Star. Clustered around the other Guardian Ship were three other ships, the first in what would eventually become North Star's battle group. These smaller ships would support the massive Guardian class ships, and provide specialized support during battle. Much as an Aircraft Carrier never operated alone, but as the center of a Carrier group composed of ships that would help defend the larger ship and extend its offensive capabilities.

Her voice, when she spoke, sounded odd to her, distant and emotionless. With care she began to work her way through the checklist of things to do before a successful warp gate could be formed.

"Prepare for zero-g. Lieutenant Sanders, shut down artificial gravity on my mark."

With a quick mental scan, she watched as stations across her ship self secured for zero-g conditions. No active gravity generators could be taken through a warp gate. The chance of causing the gate to implode in on itself, and a ship halfway through it, were simply too great.

Southern Cross would coast on her own momentum and traditional plasma thrusters while her gravitic drive systems were put on stand by. It took four minutes for all of her stations to report in. Two minutes longer than it would take on a well-trained ships crew such as the one on North Star. Not that it was surprising, since her entire crew was brand new, but she was going to have to hold a few more drills and have a word or two with her department heads.

Lieutenant Sanders doubling as her Provost, as well as head of Engineering until she choose a permanent second in command, double checked at his station and called out.

"Ma'am, all stations are reporting in secured for zero-g. Engineering is ready to put the gravitic drive systems on stand by. All systems show green for warp gate formation and Translation through a warp gate."

I really do need to choose a Provost.

Out loud she thanked the Lieutenant and opened her eyes to look towards the silent First Guardian. Who met her eyes and smiled slightly. The deep blue eyes, as always, called to her and for a moment Julie had the near overwhelming urge to undo the straps and tackle the First Guardian. Getting her wandering hormones under control, she instead returned the smile.

"You'll do fine, don't worry."

The reassurance was welcomed and Julie's smile grew at the older woman's words.

"See you on the flip side."

As if she held no doubts at all that Julie would manage to form a Warp Gate, Emily stretched out her long legs and reclined in her chair. As best one could recline in a chair to which one was strapped down to that was. The First Guardian was here as Julie's mentor and friend, and had no official duties other than some hand holding and encouraging. Apparently it was an old tradition and one that the Tiri had every intention of continuing now that the first human Guardians were emerging.

Those humans, and Tiri, who had the ability to bond with machines, were called Gifted. They were an absurdly small fraction of a percentage of the entire population. The Tiri had been on earth for a touch over sixty human years, ever since their evacuation in the face of the Bak'ra threat and the plague which had killed so many of them. In all those years they had only found a thousand or so humans who showed signs of being gifted. Out of a population of six billion. Of those three hundred were able to attend the first Guardian class, and of those only a hundred and ten would be graduating as Guardians. Julie was the first of those human gifted to bond with her ship self, even if it was an experimental ship self which had been due to be used as a test platform for new weapons.

Have to keep things interesting, I guess.

Taking a deep breath, Julie closed her eyes and allowed her senses to expand once more.

"All hands, prepare for Transition attempt. Artificial gravity shut down in three, two, one. Artificial gravity shut down, transition attempt in five minutes."

Swallowing she resisted the urge to reach out and take hold of Emie's hand. The older woman would take her hand, she had no doubt, but she wanted to do this on her own. That and a part of her was still uncomfortable with showing that much affection out in the open, especially on her command deck.

Instead the red head surveyed the region of space around her ship self. Specialized sensors became her eyes and she mapped the gravity flows and eddies through the hundreds of kilometers around her. Opening a warp gate was a tricky bit of art and science. She was determined to open one this time though, despite whatever Emily thought about how long it should take her.

The sliver of her self that was still aware of her command deck kept track of the constant flow of reports from the section heads. She was also quite aware of exactly where Emily was sitting, down to the centimeter. It was comforting to have her friend so close by, and she found herself drawing strength from that closeness as she studied the spatial fluxuations around her.

Southern Cross's massive computer arrays spun into action and aided her in defining everything that her sensors were showing her. Biting her bottom lip as a bead of sweat appeared on her forehead, she cautiously began focusing the massive amounts of energy her Warp Gate generators had stored up. It was tricky, like poking a small hole through rubber and then folding it back out onto itself without ever letting go of it. Every time she had tried this before, she had mentally slipped, and the small hole she had managed to open had closed before she could do anything. This time though, she managed to open the first hole without any problem.

Making certain that she took a deep breath, it was easy for a Guardian to become lost in her Ship Self when she sank this deep into the bond, she carefully widened the hole in the fabric of space. A warp gate was, essentially, a controlled wormhole, with a known destination. Hers was only a few thousand kilometers away, a brief hop and a skip in terms of Warp Gating, but it was still taking enormous amounts of energy.

Finally though, she had it, a fully opened Warp Gate, stabilized and ready for Transition. Feeling her face form into a grin, she eased the five kilometers of her ship self forwards and then coasted through the warp gate.

Transition was not a pleasant experience for most people. For a single instant Southern Cross was in the impossible balance point of gravitation forces strong enough to alter time itself. To Julie, it was beautiful, a play of sensor ghosts and actual readings, which bathed her mind in a glimpse of what perfection must look like.

Then it was over.

Green eyes met amused dark blue eyes and Julie smiled wider, even though two of her command crew was dry heaving.

"Told you, you could do it."

"Yeah, you did, didn't you?"

Emily was looking quite pleased with herself as she nodded in agreement.

"Yes I did."

Lady Emily Windstar sighed at the pile of data pads, which were waiting for her attention. The position of First Guardian meant that she was in charge of the military arm of the Empire, and everything pertaining to it. Which in turn made for a lot of reports to sort through, even though Angwar did a great job of filtering them before they reached her.

Thankfully she activated the com panel before it chimed. Angwar had been her provost for long enough that he didn't appear surprised that she had answered his com before he even completed it.

"I hope this is good news Angwar."

"Depends, I have the President of the U.S. on the Com for you."

With the amount of communications arrays which her Guardian ship self was equipped with it was impossible for her to track all of the communications going on without deepening her bond.

Black eyebrows raised in surprise at that. The last time she had spoken to the President they had gotten along passably well, and were on a first and last name basis. What he wanted from her at the moment though was a bit of a puzzle.

"All right, put him through. Oh, and Angwar, send a note to my father. I might not be able to make it to the swearing in ceremony."

She ignored the dubious expression on her Provost's face and switched channels.

President William S. Blake's craggy weather beaten face smiled back at her out of the com panel and the tall Guardian leaned back in her ready room chair to return the smile.

"Mr. President, this is a surprise."

He snorted and pointed a finger at her.

"I thought we sorted out this title stuff last time we talked, Emily. That "this is a surprise" line mean's you're worried about what I want to talk to you about."

Emily spread her hands and her grin widened a bit. She hated most diplomatic games with a passion. The President had been a refreshing change from most of those games.

"Yes we did Blake. Let me try that again, what can I do for you?"

The President laughed and shook his head, leaning back in his own chair. Which, Julie noted, appeared to be in the Oval Office.

"Keep your day job Emily."

The smile died as he fiddled with a pen, twirling it absently between his fingers.

"You've got some worried Republicans and Democrats down here Emily. We've been going over these specs your people sent over regarding this planetary shield thing. I have to tell you Emily, this is not going to go over well with a lot of people."

Emily knew exactly what part of it was not going to go over well and she sighed. This was not an unforeseen problem, but she had hoped that most of it would be shunted off to her brother to deal with.

"Blake, we need that shield. It's that simple. One missile gets through with a viral payload, and the same thing that happened to Tiri Prime could happen here. I don't need to tell you how fond the Bak'ra are of using viruses, do I?"

"Emily, it's not that and you know it. No one here has anything against putting up the planetary shield itself, well, just some fringe groups. What's got people riled up is what's going to happen when you get those stations finished and put it up."

Emily could feel a headache coming on and resisted the impulse to snarl at the President. Not because he was president, but she genuinely liked the man.

"As soon as the Orbital Defense Forts are operation we have to test the Planetary Shield, Blake. There is no way around what is going to happen when we do. That shield is going to shred anything that is in low Earth orbit when we activate it."

"Emily, I know you know how many satellites we're talking about here. I don't think you know just how much we depend on some of those though. Is there anyway we can get you to raise the shield or lower it maybe?"

Emily was already shaking her head before he had finished speaking. A part of her absently noted that a shuttle had received permission to dock with North Star.

"I had Blake and his people go over it again. There is no way to get a solid shield if we expand it much more, and if we go lower we'll be building the Forts too deep in the planet's atmosphere. I'm sorry Mr. President, there is no way around this one."

William Blake sighed and rubbed his face with both hands.

"Well, I'll see about trying to calm a few people down over here. How long do we have before you folks will be ready to test that Shield of yours?"

"A month or so, if everything stays on schedule. It might be a bit more than that, but I hope not."

"Well, better than nothing. It's going to screw up our communications grid all to hell, and the army's going to shit a brick. Not to mention the NSA, CIA and a few other black ops people."

"I'll see if we can do anything else Blake, but I don't know how much help I'll be able to give you. We're going to hear about this from every nation with satellites in space. You're just the first one in a stampede."

"Good luck First Guardian."

"Good luck Mr. President."

The screen went black and she leaned back in her chair once more, studying the gently curved ceiling above her. Behind her, through the massive armor plated view ports, the planet mars slowly revolved as North Star kept station in high orbit. She knew if she looked closely enough she would spot the hundreds of skeletal space docks where ships were frantically taking shape.

It wasn't only the hundred and ten Guardian ships which were being finished off, but all of their support ships. Each battle group, formed around the core Guardian ship, would comprise of a dozen or so larger ships, not counting all of the fighters assigned to it. It was a staggering amount of hulls to construct. Building went on twenty-four hours a day now, with convoys of automated cargo shuttles hauling raw materials from Luna and the Asteroid belt.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the ready room doors opening without the person on the other side having asked for permission. The scowl she directed towards the interloper was completely wasted though.

"You look like shit Emie."

Blue eyes glared at Nicholas, even as the first guardian collapsed into her chair and leaned backwards. A glare which had reduced lesser beings to stuttering idiots who scrambled to do as she ordered had little effect on the man sprawled out in a seat across from her. The light haired small man shifted constantly, as if staying still for a moment was impossible for him.

The fact that she felt like crap at the moment didn't help her mood at all either, and she had to consciously refrain from snarling at the other Guardian. Instead she amused herself with the thought that Nicholas looked almost as tired as she had ever seen him before. Which of course didn't stop him from fidgeting.

"Would you stop that!"

Her patience worn away by months of little sleep and constant strain, she snapped at the other man despite her attempts at holding her legendary temper in check. Nicholas had known her long enough that he merely lifted an eyebrow and did his best to stop shifting his position.

"Anyway, as I was saying, you look like shit."

Counting slowly down from ten kept her from attempting to do things to Nicholas, which, although probably gratifying, would get her, locked away.

"Did you have something useful to tell me, or are you just here to annoy me?"

It had been a week since Julie's first successful Warp Gate, which had also marked the last time she had managed to spend any time at all with the young human. Which was, she supposed, only adding to her current state of mind. The fact that the schedule that they had been working on, ever since their arrival on Earth sixty-one years ago, had been shot to hell was another factor.

The time she had been looking forwards to spending with Julie had flown right out the air lock. Instead of being able to spend time with the young human, she'd been hip deep dealing with a wide variety of problems. Ranging from military flare-ups in the Middle East and Pakistan on Earth, to worries about the ever-present personnel problems that they were facing. Now she could add the problems the Planetary Shield were going to cause to the list.

She'd managed to speak to Julie every night and once or twice during the day, but it just wasn't the same as being face to face.

"Well, your father, you do remember who that is right? The Emperor? He wanted to make certain that you wouldn't be late for the swearing in ceremony. Since Angwar sent him this note saying you were too busy to attend."

Closing her eyes, Emily wondered if she could get away with killing a fellow Guardian.

Probably not.

"Nicholas, I will take a shuttle down just as soon as I finish the last of these reports. I have a lot to go through though."

Gesturing towards the pile of electronic pads that were spread across her desk.

"Somehow I just knew that you were going to say that Emie. So, I brought along an added incentive."

Blue eyes snapped up from studying the pile of pads, trying to figure out which one to read first, to stare at the smiling guardian.

"What added incentive?"

"Well, I know how much you hate formal ceremonies.."

"Nicholas."

The sandy haired Guardian kept right on going, ignoring the warning tone in the First Guardian's voice.

"So, I sent a message to Southern Cross before I came over here."

"Nicholas, I swear to the Maker, if you did something stupid, I will rip your throat out."

Unfortunately Nicholas had known her since she had been a child and knew that she would do no such thing. Even though he had no intention of even trying to face down the glare that was leveled at him, he managed to offer her the pad he had brought with him. The small screen on thin eight by eleven inch wide small computer was just large enough for someone to do a bit of work on. It was the evolutionary descendant of human kinds laptop computers.

Emily stared at the innocuous piece of equipment with what Nicholas would have described, on anyone else, as a bit of uncertainty.

Taking it she played the video file that had been stored on it. Emily found herself smiling as a rather familiar cute red head stared back at her out of the file and shook a finger at the video pick up.

"Nicholas gave me a call, when I was all dressed up for this ceremony, and told me how much you hate formal occasions. Now don't you dare not show up for this Emie, I'm dressed up in this rather annoying Guardian dress uniform. If I have to get all dressed up, then so do you First Guardian."

With a wink Julie's image disappeared from the small screen. Emily sighed and set the pad aside.

"You going to come then?"

Muttering something unintelligible, Emily rose from her desk and gathered a few of the more urgent reports that she had to read. Those she could do on the shuttle ride down to Mars Base.

"I didn't hear you, did you say something?"

Emily glared at Nicholas, who smiled innocently in response.

"Yes, I'm coming. Don't you have something better to do?"

"Nope!"

Blue eyes narrowed dangerously and Nicholas found himself hastily standing and backing out of the First Guardians ready room. He might not have believed her first glare, but this one promised

that if he didn't have something to do, she would find something for him to work on, and he would not enjoy it.

Watching her friend scramble out the door, Emily allowed herself a grin. So, Julie was waiting for her to show up at the ceremony was she? Well, she had been interested in how her smaller friend would look in the black Guardian dress uniform.

Chapter Two

"You think that the Tiri changed your world. We helped, but you changed your world."

~Guardian Lacroix's speech to the Imperial officer graduating class of 2012.

Julie tugged at the jacket to her black dress uniform and suppressed the urge to scream. It wasn't that she really disliked formal functions; on the contrary she rather enjoyed all the glitter and the chance to enjoy herself. What she could do without though, was the dress uniform she was still trying to get comfortable in.

"We having fun yet?"

Doing her best to glare over at the smirking Mary, Julie shook her head.

"Do I look like I'm having fun? This stupid jacket feels like it is rubbing across my back and under my armpits. You would figure that the Tiri could come up with something a bit more comfortable."

"Oh come on, you know you won't think of it at all when we get to the actual swearing ceremony itself."

Mary was perched on the edge of the bed in the double room that they had been assigned inside of Mars Base. The swearing in ceremony would be the official graduation for the hundred or so guardian Trainee's who had made it through the training.

"It still itches."

Giggling, Mary flopped backwards onto the bed, not caring at all about the uniform she was wearing or the wrinkles she might be putting into it.

"Is tall, gorgeous and blue eyed going to be here?"

"I haven't a clue who you're talking about."

"Oh come on Julliiiiieeeee... is she going to be here?"

"She who?"

Julie grinned innocently in the mirror at her scowling friend.

"You know very well who I mean. Emie, Emily, The First Guardian, the one you're lusting after, the..."

"Alright! I think I figured out who you were talking about."

"You sure? I have a few more names I heard... Gack!"

Mary ducked the pillow tossed her way and promptly rolled right off the bed.

"Serves you right, and yes she will be there. She better be there anyway. I sent her a message telling her she better be there."

Scrambling back up onto the bed and doing her best to fix her dress uniform, Mary grinned unrepentantly.

"So you laid down the law to your girlfriend? Aghhh!!!"

This time she didn't move quite so fast and Julie pounced on her, thwapping her with another pillow.

"Ok! Ok! So you didn't lay down the law!"

Laughing Julie let up the smaller ex-hacker, blowing a strand of reddish blond hair out of her face. Before either could say anything else, a knock came from the archaic polished wooden door. An Imperial Guard, also in his dress uniform, opened the door just enough to call inside.

"Guardian Trainee's, it's time."

Giving her still unrepentant friend a scowl, Julie climbed up off the bed and did her best to make herself look presentable. Mary was waiting for her by the door, by the time she was satisfied with the way she looked. Julie was glad her friend had made it to graduating from training. Each of her three housemates had survived the training, and would be going through the swearing in ceremony tonight.

"How's it feel to be the first human Guardian by the way?"

Julie shrugged; waiting in the long marble floor hallway for the other Guardian Trainee's to assemble. Waving towards Harry and Marcus, the other two gifted humans who had gone through Guardian Training with her and Mary.

"It's not like I planned it or anything."

She was getting a bit tired of everyone asking her how it felt to be the first Human Guardian. Thankfully she hadn't had to deal with reporters, but still it was starting to wear on her nerves.

"Hey, sorry, I just wanted to know what it was like to have your ship self."

Taking a deep breath, the small red head smiled apologetically to her friend.

"Sorry, it's just that people keep asking me that. It's getting on my nerves. I can't explain what it feels like Mary. It's sort of like finding out that a part of you was missing. It's as much your body as this one is."

Shrugging as she knew she wasn't doing that great a job explaining it to Mary. She really didn't know how to explain it better than that though.

"You two ready?"

Marcus Felps and Harry Cranston had joined them, as the Marine honor guards started to sort out the trainee's into alphabetical order.

"Hey Julie, been a while, how you doin'?"

With a wink towards Mary to show her that she wasn't upset, Julie turned towards the two men and startled both of them by hugging them one after the other.

"Missed you two freaks! It's been interesting, but you'll find that out when you bond also. Did I miss a lot at training?"

"Don't you worry Julie, we'll fill ya in good and proper on all the gossip after we get this here ceremony out of the way. That right Harry?"

The bald headed black ex racecar driver nodded with, what on anyone else would have been a bemused grin, but was a large smile on his face.

"Oops, that's me, gotta go. See ya."

Harry winked and moved off. Marcus Felps, one of the oldest trainees, at fifty-five, shook his head and moved off towards his own spot in the line that was forming up. Mary leaned over and whispered just before she headed off towards her own place in line as well.

"Remember, no itching in public."

Leaving Julie to shake her own head and smile. It was good to see her three friends again. She'd missed them when she had been going through her Ship Builders Trials, even if they could be a bit annoying at times. It would be nice to have dinner with them and catch up on everything that had been going on at the training center in Plattsburgh NY.

Allen, a trainee from New Zealand who, at six and a half feet tall, reminded her of nothing so much as a crane, peered down the hallway.

"Looks like we're getting started. This should be fun."

Julie hoped he was right.

The swearing in ceremony for new Guardians had been an Imperial event for nearly three millennia now. In times gone by, when the Tiri had still been on Tiri Prime, the ceremony had taken place inside of the Imperial Palace. It was given all the pomp and circumstance of an imperial wedding. Emie could still vividly remember her own swearing in ceremony. The honor and pride she had felt standing before her father.

This time though, she stood as First Guardian, alongside her father and brother. The crown prince stood to the right of her father, and she stood to his left, slightly behind the emperor. There should have been hundreds of Guardians and Guardian Trainee's spread throughout the hall before them. All dressed in the black with silver trim of a dress uniform. Now though, that hall was filled with politicians, ambassadors, envoys, and the first senators of what would, when it was completed, become the Imperial Senate. Along with them were the few dozen gifted humans who were in the second class of guardian trainee's.

There were so few of them.

Emily was depressingly familiar with the state of their current forces. The Guardians who were about to be sworn in would bring the number up to a hundred and thirty. Twenty of which were Tiri Guardians who had survived the evacuation. A hundred and ten of the new Guardian class fourteen Ships had been constructed. Ten of those ships would go empty though, at least until the next class of trainee's graduated. The deaths of the ten trainees' who had been due to bond with those ships had been a large blow to the Guardian force build up.

With a sigh, Emily straightened herself as she caught Winston glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. Her brother always had enjoyed the diplomatic side of things better than the military. She was positive the glint in his familiar blue eyes was at her expense.

Still, it would be good to pay attention.

The Imperial guards, in their purple ceremonial armor and weaponry, stood along the right and left hand walls of the raised dais that the Emperor and his two children now waited.

It went by the book; everyone had a place to be, and a protocol to follow. There was no place for any mix-ups or errors. Not with the eyes of the world watching the first Imperial function to be televised.

One by one the Guardian Trainee's came forwards. Four honor guards, in ceremonial armor, escorted each of them as well. The lead guard of each Guardian to be came before the dais, and formally announced the name of the trainee whom they were assigned to protect. It was considered a great honor to be chosen to be lead honor guard.

By Emily's count, Julie McGrath was the forty-fifth name to be announced.

The Trainee's themselves lined up in a row facing the dais as they were escorted inside. They varied between looking a touch nervous to openly staring up at the vaulted ceiling above them. It was an exact replica of the Imperial Hall back on Tiri Prime, and Emily knew that the swirling holograms above were quite distracting.

Julie looked up from her place in line, and excited green eyes met blue. For long moments, Julie and Emily both were oblivious to everything else around them. Green called to blue, and blue called to green. They both may have been bonded to a ship self, but they were the completion of each other's souls.

When it passed, most of the ceremony was already gone and Julie grinned as Emily's face turned red.

Emperor Weston Windstar the Second stepped forwards and placed the clenched fist of his right hand over his heart.

"You who are about to become Guardians, do you swear fealty to me and the Empire?"

As one a hundred voices shouted.

"Yes Sire!"

"You who are about to become Guardians, do you swear to protect those who rely upon you at all costs?"

"Yes Sire!"

"You who are about to become Guardians, do you swear to uphold the laws of the Empire to the best of your ability?"

"Yes Sire!"

"You who are about to become Guardians, do you swear to follow the Guardians Code?"

"Yes Sire!"

"Then I salute you, as your Emperor. Honor, Wisdom, and Strength!"

"Honor, Wisdom, and Strength!"

As unobtrusively as they could, both Julie and Weston moved forwards to place a hand under their father's elbow. He had seemed to waver there for a second at the end, and Emily shared a worried look with her brother. Her father, at over three hundred earth years, was near the end of regen life span.

Quietly, as the new Guardians cheered along with the crowd, Julie whispered to her father.

"Father? Are you alright?"

The old man took a few deep breaths and then patted her hand. His finger's, to her eyes, seemed to tremble slightly as he did so.

"Fine daughter, fine. Go see to you're Miss McGrath, she's waiting for you. Weston will help me back to my rooms. I'm just a little tired."

"Don't worry Emie, I'll get the doctors to take a look at him before I take him to his room."

Weston whispered as he began to help their father away, conscious of the prying eyes, which would be focused on them from the gallery above.

Emily glanced back down the dais, towards where the new Guardians, their honor guards, and a good part of the audience were celebrating. Julie was standing at the base of the dais, looking up towards the three of them with an expression of concern.

Emie shook her head ever so slightly and Julie relaxed offering the First Guardian a smile.

"I'll meet up with you, send for me if it's something serious ok Weston?"

Her brother just nodded and concentrated on helping her father without appearing to help him down the other side of the dais, where the Imperial honor guard formed up around them.

"He alright?"

Emily nodded as she joined Julie at the base of the stairs.

"He's under a lot of strain."

"Like a certain First Guardian I know."

Emily smiled as she felt Julie laid a hand on her elbow. The two of them making their way towards the nearest exit to go and see how the Emperor was doing, their honor guards formed up behind them.

"It's going to get worse before it gets better, Julie."

"I know Emie, I know."

"Wine?"

"Depends, what kind is it?"

"It's called Melantar, sweet wine. This is one of the few bottles left, as far as I know anyway."

"Well, we are celebrating. Does it go with whatever this is?"

"Think of it as trout."

Julie made a bit of a disbelieving face at the First Guardian. It wasn't that she didn't like the fish; it just looked a bit odd. The color was off, just a bit too red for fish, even if it did taste pretty good. Emie it seemed had gone all out to make this a memorable celebration.

The two of them were once more in the Gardens. Mars base was a huge dome like structure, buried under the surface of the north pole of Mars. The hangers and landing pads were located closer to the surface, while the majority of Tiri civilians who had survived the evacuation lived below in the dome. The Gardens, as they were called, had been carved out of the rock along the side of the dome, and afforded a beautiful view of the city below.

Julie and Emily were holding a celebration of sorts here, perched on one of the garden terraces. Surrounded by flowers, which had no human name, they were celebrating Julie's swearing in ceremony.

"Your father alright?"

"Yes, the doctors are going to keep an eye on him over night and make certain he gets rest. He's just tired I think."

Julie chewed thoughtfully as she watched Emie slowly take a sip of wine. Her friend's eyes were sad and she wondered what the other guardian was thinking, although she had a hunch.

"He misses mother."

"What was she like?"

Emily stretched back in her chair, tilting back her head to look upwards at the simulated night sky above them. The stars even twinkled.

"She was a Guardian, and she had black hair like I do. I get my blue eyes from my father though. I would have liked to know her. She was first Guardian and that's how they met."

Noticing the darkening expression on her friends face, Julie reached forwards and picked up the bottle of wine.

Time to change the conversation this is supposed to be a celebration.

"Here is to family."

Julie raised her glass in salute to her own dead parents and took a sip of the Melantar. It was indeed a sweet wine, and she found herself enjoying the subtle flavors which seemed to be wrapped around one another.

Emily smiled and raised her glass in salute as well, before forcing herself to relax.

"How's it feel to be a Guardian now?"

"Better now that I'm out of that dress uniform. You would think that you Tiri would have come up with something that was at least somewhat comfortable to wear after all this time."

"Hmph, I think that Logistics actually keeps them that way to keep us from falling asleep during official events."

"Let's just say I won't mind not wearing that again anytime soon. The regular uniforms are alright, but that thing...ugh."

Julie managed to screw up her face in such a grimace that Emily grinned.

There we go, that's it, just forget about everything else for a while beautiful.

She watched as the First Guardian slowly relaxed and the worry in those blue eyes faded. It would return, Julie knew that, but she'd do her best to help her friend bear up under the weight that was bearing down onto her.

"So what is this gray stuff?"

"It's like soup, but thicker. Try it."

"Hmm... not bad, it tastes kind of like carrots."

"Meets with your approval then?"

Julie pretended to consider that as she finished the last spoonful and nodded.

"I suppose so. I guess you Tiri had some pretty good food. I liked the orange thing with the green stripes through it. Anytime you have more of that, ship it my way, and I'll do away with it."

Emily smiled slowly at that.

"It's called Kira fruit, I'll see what I can do."

Julie studied the taller woman through lowered lashes as she thought. She'd been looking forwards to a chance to get the First Guardian alone for months now. With studied innocence she picked at what was left of her Kira fruit, making designs with the thick orange and green skin.

"What's your schedule like?"

She was conscious of blue eyes studying her, but she continued to play with the peelings on the plate in front of her.

"Well, I have to head out to the Asteroid belt to check on our mining operations tomorrow. Then the day after I'm due to have a talk with Darrien about the fleet construction schedule. In the afternoon I'll be swinging by the Orbital Fort construction in Earth Orbit. Then, if I have time, I'm going to do a lecture in the evening at the Guardian Training camp at Plattsburgh Air Force Base."

Julie looked up hesitantly and smiled hopefully when she found blue eyes watching her with what might have been amusement.

"I meant, what's your schedule tonight?"

"Oh, tonight?"

Emily frowned and pretended to ponder the thought while Julie rolled her eyes.

"Yes you goof, tonight. Are you going out to Pluto, Antarctica or something?"

"No, I think I managed to get an entire evening off. Imagine that."

Emie leaned forwards across the table and lowered her voice conspiratorially. Julie found herself leaning forwards as well to hear what the First Guardian was going to say.

"I think Angwar and Dr. Miato conspired to make certain that I had an evening off. I was biting off to many heads I guess."

Julie couldn't help but grin at the thought of the ever so proper short gray haired chief medical officer from North Star conspiring to do anything.

"So you're all mine tonight?"

Blue eyes darkened with desire and Julie swallowed at the low purr that was Emily's voice as she answered.

"Do you want me to be?"

I'm going to die if she doesn't kiss me. Oh god, I'm going to die if she does kiss me.

"Dear god yes."

Then there was no more room for thought as warm soft lips pressed against hers. Vaguely Julie realized she probably shouldn't be trying to shove the table out of the way, but it had been a very long few months.

Unfortunately the table was anchored to the bedrock from which the garden terrace was carved out of.

Grunting in frustration she got up, managing to keep in contact with Emily's lips and get around the edge of the table. Breaking away from those talented lips she sat down on the First Guardians lap and buried her face in her friend's shoulder. Both of them, she was happy to see where having problems breathing and Emie's heart was beating rapidly.

"Perfect."

Julie hadn't realized she had spoken until Emily ran her fingers through her short red hair and nodded in agreement.

"Almost perfect."

Frowning slightly Julie looked up at that.

"Almost?"

With a serious expression Emie nodded and bent down to tease Julie by nibbling on her lips. Both of them groaned as Julie opened her mouth for Emily's questing tongue. Emily's mouth and hands were making it hard to remember whatever it was that they had been talking about, so Julie didn't even try.

When they finally did break apart, Emily grinned at her breathlessly and trailed a finger down her chest. Just lightly brushing against her breasts.

"There could be less clothes involved."

Julie swallowed and nodded wordlessly, her fingers already starting on the First Guardian's uniform.

"Less clothes would be good."

A button and then a second came loose and she caught a glimpse of pale skin in the valley of Emily's breasts. Just one more button and she would have a clear view of those breasts themselves.

She was distracted from her objective though when a hand snaked its way underneath the loose shirt she was wearing to cup her breast. Groaning she hungrily pulled Emily back to her, trying to devour her lips. The warm wet haven of her mouth was rapidly becoming Julie's favorite

place. When the First Guardian stood up and started carrying her towards the apartment she didn't notice until they had passed through the sliding doors. Even then she barely realized it.

Tugging at Emie's blouse she frowned in frustration, as it didn't come off easily. Emily's hands weren't doing anything to help her concentration. The black haired woman's fingers managed to push her bra up and was stroking her nipples. Shuddering she buried her face once more against the side of Emie's neck and growled, tugging at the First Guardian's shirt.

"Off, Now!"

A low chuckle reverberated through the body she was clinging to, turning into a groan as Julie managed to slide a hand between skin and shirt to palm a breast. Emily desperately started to pull Julie's blouse up over her head, while Julie did her best to undo the last of the buttons on Emily's shirt. The two were nearly there, both of them just a few seconds from the naked flesh that they craved with the com panel sounded.

Both of them ignored it, intent on more important things at the moment. Emily's fingers were splaying across Julie's lower stomach, pushing down the waistband of the skirt the red head was wearing. Julie herself was more intent on the First Guardian's breasts, and she managed to get the shirt free from the pants of Emie's uniform by the time the two of them became aware of the incessant beeping.

Both of them cursed as one.

Grinding her teeth in frustration Emily sat Julie aside on the bed and stalked towards the beeping com panel. Julie laid back on the bedspread, her blouse open and skirt halfway down her hips.

"I'm going to kill someone."

Emily agreed with the smaller woman and punched the com unit on. Snarling at the young com officer who was looking at her with obvious trepidation.

"If this isn't an emergency you're going to Pluto. What is it?"

"umm.. F-first Guardian?"

Blue eyes narrowed dangerously as the young man stammered.

"Spit it out, or you're going to be scrubbing plasma vents on Pluto."

"Y-yes M-ma'am. I've g-got a priority one communiqué for you?"

Julie raised herself up off the bed enough to watch as Emily's fingers curled into fists and giggled. At least she wasn't the first one who was frustrated at the moment. The First Guardian took a deep breath, obviously trying to control herself before answering.

"Put it through."

The screen blanked for a moment to be replaced by the familiar face of her ex-superior in Majestic, Major Gregory Sims. The former Air Force officer had been transferred, along with a good chunk of the rest of the Earth's armed forces, to the Imperial forces. The Major had been given the duty of tracking down any internal threats to Earth's chances of surviving the coming Bak'ra invasion.

Julie got up as she recognized the area behind the Major.

"First Guardian, we have a problem."

If Major Sims was surprised to see Julie wander into the range of the video pick up, he didn't show it.

"What sort of problem, and I thought you were searching for General Whittecker?"

Ten minutes later they were both packed and on their way to the shuttle hangers.

It took them a little under three hours to get back to Earth. The two Guardian ships slipped into high earth orbit, and minutes afterwards the two Guardians themselves were shuttled planet side.

Emily had been silent through the entire trip, scowling slightly and studying the preliminary reports that had arrived during the trip. She was conscious of Julie sitting next to her, and she was thankful that the shorter woman had come along.

It was not going to be a good day.

The moment the shuttle had touched down, she was up and out the door as soon as she could after her Honor Guard. The place was hectic, with secret service, cops, and Imperial personnel swarming across the grounds. She could only imagine what sort of chaos was going on inside.

Major Sims was waiting for them just outside of the safety line. Getting too close to the shuttle's antigravity drives while they were active was a good way to die a rather grizzly death.

Julie was two steps behind her as she strode towards the side entrance of the White House. It was definitely a different setting than her last visit here, she thought grimly. The Marine guards spread out to secure the area, not that it wasn't already crawling with security people as it was.

"Major, what do you have for me?"

"The plasma bolt originated from at least a kilometer or so away. Tentative sensor data from the Orbital Forts and Sensor Platforms indicates it was probably a VP-303 Plasma Carbine. It

punched through the bullet proof glass and hit him at the base of President Blake's head, dead center. It's not a pretty sight."

"The search teams manage to track down anyone yet?"

"No Ma'am. I was going to ask if I could have Julie's help if we get the Plasma Carbine back though. She might be able to get something off of it."

The First Guardian paused halfway towards the waiting Secret Service agents to meet concerned green eyes.

"You up to helping the Major if he needs it?"

Julie managed a small smile and nodded, quietly answering.

"I worked for him in Majestic, I figure I could lend him a helping hand again if he needed it."

Emie placed a hand on the smaller woman's upper arm and squeezed it in comfort. The black haired woman smiled thankfully, then turned to deal with what was going to be an unpleasant encounter.

She strode towards the gathered security people. Blue eyes narrowed dangerously as the first of those security personnel started to reach out to stop her. The man reconsidered what would have been a rather bad idea and stepped aside. They knew who this was. Her Honor Guard would have to remain outside while they checked their weapons, but Julie and the Major followed directly after her.

Vice President Charles H. Fairchild was waiting for them just inside. The man was a good four inches shorter than her, and she always wondered exactly how much oil it took to keep his black hair parted like that.

"Lady Windstar, thank you for coming."

With a small narrowing of her eyes, Emily accepted the human's hand and shook it. She could feel Julie stiffening just behind her at that small slur to her title.

"Vice President Fairchild, well met again. I spoke to Weston on my way over here. He and my father are very concerned about this, and promise whatever aid you need. I already have our Internal Affairs division ready to assist you in tracking down those who did this."

She motioned towards Major Sims, about to introduce him when the Vice President held up a hand.

"No, I don't think that is necessary Lady Windstar. It's already clear that you're Empire was somehow involved in this. I intend to find out how, and when I do, this world government of yours is going out the window."

Emily watched in amazement as the Vice President, soon to be sworn in as the President, spun about and stalked away from her. Julie and the Major both looked a bit stunned as she turned to look at them.

"Major."

Major Sims snapped out of it quickly though and straightened slightly at the tone of command in her voice.

"Find out what happened and do it fast. This could undo everything we've managed to accomplish so far. I want the people who did this. Get whatever help you need, but this is your top priority now."

"Yes Ma'am."

He saluted and hurried off. Emily cast a glance down the hallway that the Vice President had gone down and then turned back to Julie.

"Julie, your trainings going to have to take a bit of a back seat at least for a while. If the Major needs your help, do whatever you can. I'll see about making positive that Weston and my father know what's going on."

With a scowl towards the direction the Vice President had taken, Emily led her smaller companion back outside.

"Let's get out of here. Seems we aren't welcome at the moment. Julie, be careful on this one, just help the Major. No going off on your own and getting into trouble, ok?"

Julie managed a smile at that and looked as innocent as she could.

"Why Emily, are you saying I get into a lot of trouble?"

The First Guardian snorted at that.

"Emily you attract trouble. Just be careful ok?"

"I will Emie, don't worry, I will."

Emily watched Julie and her Honor Guard head off to catch up with the Major. With a frown she shook her head once more and headed towards the waiting shuttle. Things were going to hell.

Chapter Three

To understand what happened, it is important to understand that things were in a state of imbalance. As anything delicately balanced over a precipice, the slightest nudge could send everything tumbling down.

~Major Gregory Sims, Imperial Intelligence.

Julie wiped the bead of sweat from her brow irritably. She was tired, sticky and had the worst feeling that what she had thought was a heat rash on her arm was something entirely different.

Dodging an oncoming mini bus, she made her way across the bustling street and into the welcoming sanctuary of the hotel. With a small sigh of annoyance she did her best to air out her shirt, trying to get rid of at least some of the sweat that was sticking to her.

Beijing, it seemed, did not agree with her. The heat wave sweeping the area did little to help.

A polite nod to the desk clerks and she managed to make her escape into the elevators, away from the throngs of people spilling into the lobby of the hotel. It seemed that she was not the only one fleeing the oppressive heat outside. Bitterly she wondered if any of them could have done a better job than she had these last two weeks.

They'd traced down every lead they could think of trying to get their hands on the men, which had killed the American president. Each of the leads had leads had lead to the same thing, nothing.

The plasma carbine had been relatively easy to find. Too easy in fact, left as it had been at the site it had been fired from. As if to taunt them with the only piece of solid evidence they would find. Even more disturbing, she had not been able to read anything from the weapon itself.

It was blank, as if it had never been touched, or fired.

It was late summer now, and to add to the turmoil, which was spreading throughout the western hemisphere, the American elections were to be held in the fall.

Using her key card she entered the suit, which was her room, and tossed her satchel onto the couch. At least the Major had gotten good rooms for her and the rest of the team. Who were currently out with the major trying to track down a slim lead on the ever-evasive General Whittecker.

The shower was a haven after the hot muggy weather outside.

Emerging from it Julie moved towards the com panel that the team had brought with them.

"Computer, access Imperial com system."

Yawning she continued drying her hair while the computer completed the link up.

"Link established."

"Computer, contact First Guardian Emily Windstar, personal priority."

It took about five minutes, in which time the red haired Guardian managed to dry her hair and put on the long t-shirt and boxers, she'd brought with her to sleep in. When Emily appeared on the screen, looking tired as well, she was just turning down the bed covers.

"Hey you."

A warm smile crossed her face unbidden and Julie perched on the end of the bed.

"Hey yourself, how you doing down there?"

"Eh, we had a few leads, none of them panned out. Major Sims is out tracking down a lead on General Whittecker, who seems to have been in the area a while ago. We still don't know where the Plasma Carbine came from, but I think I agree with the Major on this one and it probably came from one of the training bases. With more of them being used, and made, they'll be getting harder to control. Although I guess the chip thing will limit the number of people who could have used it."

Emily leaned backwards, enough so that Julie could see that the First Guardian was still in her uniform. By the bit of background she could spot, the human guessed that her Tiri friend was aboard her Ship Self in orbit.

"What about you? Any luck keeping things together?"

Emily snorted in disgust and ran a tired hand through her long hair.

"Some. All hell is breaking loose out here, sweetheart. The Americans, or a good portion of their military, are almost outright accusing us of having something to do with the assassination. Which is insane because I liked Blake, he was a good sort and... why are you smiling at me like that?"

"Say it again?"

Emily was looking at her almost like she had lost her mind, but Julie didn't care at the moment. She just wanted to hear it again.

"Say what?"

"What you called me."

It took a moment but understanding slowly dawned on the First Guardian and she leaned towards the video pick up. A slow smile that did all sorts of wonderful things to the shorter woman spread across Emie's face.

"Say what again, sweetheart?"

Julie's green eyes darkened with desire as she noticed how deep blue Emily's eyes looked at that moment. Leaning forwards as well, almost as if she wished to kiss the First Guardian, which is exactly what she did want to do at the moment, Julie purred.

"Keep it up First Guardian, and I'm going to tie you down somewhere and make certain that I have you all to myself for a night."

A dark eyebrow arched at that and Emie grinned.

"Is that a threat or a promise?"

Ohhhh... I love playing with her.

"Definitely a promise."

"One I'm going to keep you to sweetheart."

Emily looked like she was going to say something more, but an insistent beeping sounded in the background. Scowling in the direction of what Julie assumed where her ready room doors, Emily muttered something under her breath before looking back to Julie.

"You be careful out there. Promise?"

"I promise. Take care Emie. I miss you."

The smile that she got in return for that eased the ache that had been present in the pit of her soul ever since she had left the First Guardian's side.

"Miss you too, shortie."

With a wink Emily disappeared from the screen before Julie could growl in outrage over that nickname.

She was just about to step away from the panel when the screen activated itself. Blinking in surprise the red head cautiously approached the com panel. Instead of the normal black screen it was now showing a test pattern, with an indicator light at the bottom, which showed that the com panel was linking to the Imperial communications grid once more.

It took a bit longer to connect than it had when she called Emily. Still, in a few moments the test pattern disappeared, to be replaced with a familiar, if unexpected, figure.

Dressed in an early twentieth century flapper's dress, complete with short cut black hair, and pearl necklace, Betty was surprising sight. Not one that many people enjoyed, since Betty, even though she was sentient, was an Artificial Intelligence program. She'd been designed by those few Bak'ra who had been on Earth before the arrival of the Tiri, and had been used in an attempt

to destroy Mars Base. It had taken Emily, fully bonded with the Base's computer systems, to free the sentient program and allow her to make her own choices.

Those choices, so far at least, had been to aid the Tiri in preparing to fight her former masters.

"Betty?"

There was a slight delay, barely noticeable, before the brown-eyed woman winked in answer and sketched a curtsy.

"Is that any way to welcome the woman who single handedly saved Mars base? Come on, where is the effusive welcome? The joyous recognition?"

Emily grinned and bowed towards the screen.

"Forgive me oh powerful one, how are you doing?"

"I'm having fun driving human and Tiri scientists insane as they try to figure out how I can be sentient. It's fun."

With a wave of an arm, the sentient program formed a lounge chair nearby her and promptly put it to use. Doing a very nice job lounging in it.

"I take it you're the reason my Com panel activated itself?"

"Bingo. Your pretty smart for a human."

Snorting, Julie took a seat on her bed and echoed the relaxed pose of the other woman. As far as she was concerned, Betty was nearly as much fun talking to as God, also known as Katya, was.

"Thanks, I think. You track me down just to chit chat, or did you have a reason?"

Pouting, Betty raised a limp hand to her forehead and bemoaned the lack of manners that some humans showed. Julie just raised an eyebrow, trying to mimic the way Emily had of shutting people up. Judging by the laughter the action got her, she didn't think she'd succeeded.

"Oh be quiet."

Grinning Betty shook her head though.

"Sorry Julie, or should I call you Guardian now? Congratulations on that by the way. I've been keeping track of what's going on earth side, and I had a bit of time to sort through a few of my former master's files. They were smart enough to ditch most of them, but I found a few still hiding out. I sent a copy to you, the ever efficient Major Sims, and of course Guardian command."

Frowning slightly at the direction that the conversation had suddenly taken, Julie nodded slowly, waiting for what Betty seemed to be building towards.

"So, I was sifting through them, and I found this bit of crap that's going to be really interesting to you all. It's got all these big money transfers back and forth, some of them so complex I can't sort all of them out without spending a lot of time going through them. The upshot is though, that I've got some Bak'ra activities connected to a lot of Earth Companies, and several government agencies. You've got a copy of it, and I don't think yas gonna like the results."

Julie leaned forwards, scrambling across the bed to grab her personal com unit and was dialing Major Sims extension by the time Betty was done talking.

"What sort of agencies are we talking about Betty?"

"A lot of them, but I don't think they knew who the money was coming from. A few of the companies might have, but I'm not sure 'bout that."

"Do we even know what the money was being used for?"

"Ya, that's the bit you ain't gonna like. All of the agencies, and the companies, used the money for one thing."

"What?"

For once the flapper's face was deadly serious as she stared at the young Guardian.

"The human genome project."

Julie blinked in surprise, not having expected that. Her thoughts were interrupted by a noise from the small black cell phone like device she had been holding.

"What? Oh, yes major. We may have a lead. No sir, it's from Betty. Yes sir, the AI program. She sent you a copy of the information she gathered. The human genome project. Yes Sir, very well. I'll be waiting."

Closing the device she sighed and began gathering the small travel pack she took with her wherever she went.

"So, ya heading out?"

A slightly annoyed shake of her head towards the still present Betty, and she tossed her com unit into the travel pack.

"Yes, seems the Major wants to take a look at this info you dug up. The rest of the team will be here in twenty minutes and we'll be heading out. There go my dreams of a good nights sleep."

"Sorry Guardian, take care out there huh? Seems like your girlfriend is having all sorts of problems in the Western Hemisphere, don't want you to get into trouble also."

With that, and a blown kiss towards the screen, Betty disappeared. The screen and com unit powered down, and Julie was left scrambling to pack the rest of her baggage.

Chapter Four

"God only knows what he was trying to do. It was supposed to be a recon mission. Quick extraction, get in, get out and somewhere along the way we were supposed to find evidence linking the Tiri to the President's assassination. Like I said, fucking politicians."

~Captain Jeffry Kilgore.

The Black Hawk helicopters raced through the night. The ground raced below them, not that anyone inside of them other than the pilots, could see it. It was dark outside, with just a sliver of a moon and good cloud cover to mask the helicopters approach.

Captain Kilgore muffled a curse once more as he checked his map. Everything about this mission was FUBAR, fucked up beyond all recognition, as far as he was concerned. Not that his concerns meant much when it came to trying to argue with the Chief of Staff, or the President for that matter.

"Sir? ETA is five minutes. Romeo is already starting its pass."

Kilgore grunted in response and nodded to Sergeant Banergee. The dark-skinned mountain of a man got the squad of men who rode along with Kilgore moving through their final preparations. Men *and* women, Kilgore once more noted with more than a little irritation.

Bad enough the Tiri had stripped every Armed Force they could get their hands on. It was even worse to see the shortage of manpower up close, and the Captain was quite conscious of how short-handed they were. The two women in his team were clear enough reminders of that.

"Jeff, you really think this is going to work?"

There was only one person who was allowed to call him by his first name, and Kilgore glanced at his second in command with a sigh. Frank Alexander was a small man but he had a keen intelligence.

Lowering his voice as well, he watched the other Spec Ops do a double check on equipment and weapons.

"Hell if I know, Frank. Doesn't much matter now, we'll be down once Romeo does its stuff."

Both men sighed at that and looked back at the map spread between them, using red lenses to dim the small flashlight that they used to illuminate the parchment. God only knew if Romeo would work, and if it didn't, they were going to have a rough landing.

Jeffery Kilgore glared at the darkness outside of the helicopter and sighed. After President Blake's assassination, the U.S. military's stance on the Tiri, and the Empire, had changed. President Fairchild had been sworn in officially two days after President Blake's death. The relationship between the U.S. and the Empire had gone from polite to near outright name calling after that, with President Fairchild doing everything short of accusing the Tiri of orchestrating the death of President Blake. Which the Tiri had been fairly scandalized by, and had reacted to by bluntly saying that the American President was out of his mind if he thought that they had anything to do with it.

Which left one Captain Jeffery Kilgore in the middle, trying to find evidence that he wasn't even certain existed. It was going to be one of those kinds of nights; he just knew it.

The raucous snarl of a priority hail woke her up.

Emily wearily opened her eyes, and wondered what time it was. The answer of course came immediately from her link with her ship self.

Dear Maker, three thirty in the morning. No wonder I feel like crap.

Swinging her legs over the edge of the bed in the guest quarters she'd been given at Longbow, and punched on the com panel. Wincing at the bright light, she glared at the young Imperial Marine Lieutenant on the screen.

"What?"

Even to her, her voice sounded pissed off. Bad enough waking up this early after no sleep for the last forty-eight hours, even worse to wake up not holding a certain redheaded Guardian.

"Umm, First Guardian? We have a problem up here, and the Major wanted me to alert you."

The last of her sleep was already fading from her system by the time he finished speaking. Reaching for her discarded uniform, it wasn't a far stretch since she had tossed it on the ground, she kept an eye on the Lieutenant.

"What sort of problem?"

"We've got some American Air Force Hercules aircraft coming up on our airspace, Ma'am. We're also showing some helicopters at under a hundred feet, about four minutes out."

"Lovely. Have Major Whitehall put the base on alert. I'll be right there."

"Yes, Ma'a..."

Killing the circuit, Emily stood and dressed with the quick efficiency of one who had been putting on uniforms at odd times of the day since she was young.

She made it to the command center two minutes before the first of the large turbo prop-driven airplanes entered the base's ten-kilometer airspace. Major Whitehall was waiting for her as she stepped off the lift, accompanied by her Honor Guards. Emily wished that Angwar had come down planetside as well, but her Provost had stayed onboard North Star.

"Major, what do you have for me?"

"Ma'am, I've got ten fighters up to intercept the Hercules. I have ground forces on standby in case the helicopters try anything, but they seem to be holding position outside of our airspace."

"Right at the ten click mark?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Hmmm... they'll probably land and try to sneak troops in on foot then, if that's what they're up to. Make sure that those damn Hercules don't start dropping paratroops though, that could get messy."

"Yes, Ma'am. They can't know how big Longbow has grown or they wouldn't be coming in with only six dagger's worth of troops."

The First Guardian watched the Major stalk away, then turned and headed towards the com station. The same young Lieutenant was there and she grinned slightly at the wariness in his eyes as he spotted her headed his way.

"Lieutenant, get me a secure link to North Star, then prepare to send a priority one fleet wide message."

"Yes, Ma'am, I'll have the secure link in a second."

The black-haired Guardian nodded absently at that and turned to regard the tactical holo tank installed in the center of the large room. She wondered what the men onboard those Air Force craft thought they were doing.

Unfortunately, the First Guardian had a pretty good idea why they were doing it.

"Ma'am, I have a secure link to North Star."

With one last scowl she turned from the holo tank to face her Provost, who was looking a bit concerned at her through the com screen.

"Angwar, we seem to have some uninvited dinner guests on the way down here. I'm going to warn the other bases to keep an eye out, but they are probably only doing a single raid. I figure they think they can try and find information about President Blake's assassination somehow. Keep the fleet on alert, and pass the word to the other Guardians to stay on their toes. Get a hold of Julie for me and let her know what's happening. I don't want her getting caught up in this somehow."

"Very well, Emie, anything else?"

"Keep my marine's on standby, incase we need reinforcements down here. It doesn't look like we will, but you never know."

"I'll get right on it."

"Unidentified aircraft, this is Imperial Base Longbow. You are entering restricted airspace. Leave this area at once or you will be forced to."

The two pilots glanced at each other, and then studiously ignored the continued calls for them to abandon their course. They had their orders, and they would follow them. Even if they were more than a bit nervous about what those orders had them doing.

The Imperial fighters had their own orders, and they formed up alongside the American Hercules aircraft. The Hercules was only twice the size of those fighters and there was no chance in hell of them outrunning the Tiri craft.

Pilot Erik Mathews glared out of his armored transparasteel cockpit of his Tiri fighter at the larger craft besides his. He didn't know what these guys thought they were doing, but they didn't seem to understand that it was over.

"Come on guys, you know it's over. Don't make us take this to another level."

When there was no answer he switched to the command channel, keeping a close watch over his fighters and their positions near the American planes.

"Longbow, this is Falcon One."

The face that appeared on his display was not one that he had been expecting, and he found himself straightening his shoulders.

"Longbow here, what do you have for us, Falcon One?"

"First Guardian, I have a negative on the warn off. Requesting further instructions."

The First Guardian's eyes narrowed and Mathews was very glad that he didn't seem to be the target of that anger.

"They are not to be allowed to cross the five kilometer mark, understood Falcon One? You stop them before they get there, or we force them to land."

"Yes, Ma'am. Are you authorizing me to use force?"

There was a slight pause at that, and Mathews nearly sagged in relief as she finally answered.

"I don't want any fatalities Falcon One. Try to disable their aircraft if necessary, but no fatalities."

"Understood, Ma'am."

Former Air Force pilot Erik Mathews sighed and flipped channels, to address the rest of his daggers worth of fighters. It still amused him how the Tiri counted military units in terms of weapons, a dagger's worth was ten, a sword was ten daggers or a hundred, and a lance was a thousand, or ten swords worth. Still, his amusement vanished as he glanced out his cockpit at the dimly visible Hercules.

He had no intention of shooting at what a large part of him still considered his people's aircraft. Still, he had a new duty now, and he was beginning to understand how much it meant.

Slowly, day-by-day perhaps, humans were starting to understand what was going on. Not only with their intellect, but also with their hearts. The torn loyalties were still there, but he was seeing less of that these days. People knew what was at stake, or were starting to anyway.

He only hoped that the pilots in the Hercules wouldn't force him to make them land their planes.

There were, he reflected as he started giving orders to the other pilots, always a few stupid ones.

"Always have to be a few stupid ones."

"What's that, Sir?"

Captain Kilgore ignored the slightly confused special operations man besides him and continued to forge his way through the surprisingly high grass. His men were spread out around him, and he made a note to continue his cursing about this stupid plan mentally.

Unfortunately, however stupid it was, it was up to him to come up with a way to make it work.

"The Hercules' have turned back, Ma'am, seven kilometers out."

Lady Windstar breathed a sigh of relief at that, but not much of one. The helicopters, as expected, had left a few minutes ago as well. She studied the crimson dots slowly moving in the holo tank before her. Each of those represented American spec ops, or perhaps a Marine, or even a SEAL she supposed. They were making their way in the darkness towards the base from East, through the grass.

"Whoever's leading them knows his stuff, Ma'am. Look at the way they've got the main body out here, as a decoy I bet. Trying to get us to focus on it, so this one can slip through."

Emily's lips twitched slightly in what could have been a slight grin and nodded in agreement with the Major standing besides her.

"It probably would work, if we didn't have each and every one of them pegged on sensors. Who do you have available to wrap these guys up and get them to surrender without too much fuss?"

The Major considered that with a small frown then grinned. It was all the more disturbing a grin, Emily thought, since the Major's face was one, which was naturally inclined to frown.

"I think I have the perfect team already on base Ma'am. They're here waiting for transport to Mars Base for more training. I think they would do very well indeed."

Deep blue eyes narrowed as the First Guardian looked up from the Holo tank at the grinning Major.

"Oh? Who exactly is in charge of this team of yours?"

"God."

Emily couldn't help but join the Major in grinning at that.

"Oh yes, that will do perfectly."

Katya was completely unaware that she was grinning fiercely as she moved her powered battle armor through the dark night. Her sword of troops was deployed behind her and to her flanks in a perfect semi circle. High overhead, her suit's sensor suite tracked the fighters, which were keeping station high above her. Air cover, she was positive, was not going to be a problem this time at least.

"Hey, God, I've got them on my sensors. Two clicks and closing."

Katya's grin widened as she looked at the sensor data being relayed to her.

"Got it, Mark. I'm taking Wolf and Bravo dagger with me. Take the others and wrap up the diversion, I'll take care of the sneaky ones."

"Gotcha. Good huntin'"

Mark was good folk, she had decided a while ago, and she had no doubt he would be able to wrap up the diversion force. She was more worried about the Americans who were obviously the true assault force. Her orders had come from Emily herself, and she was not going to get on the First Guardian's bad side by mucking this up. After all, her interest in the First Guardian's ever so eligible brother might take a beating.

"Wolf, Bravo, you guys are with me. No mess-ups or you'll answer to me and the First Guardian. Hold your fire unless I order it, and for the love of God, don't push them or they'll probably start firing at you. I want this tight, got it?"

The chorus of 'Aye's' and 'Yes, Ma'ams' chimed through her headset even as she was moving. She loved the feel of full powered armor, a lot. The weapons were impressive enough, but added to that was the fact that the thrusters on the back gave her the ability to "leap" a good fifty feet in a bound.

Then there were the neural impulse controls which made the suit become something like a second skin to her.

She put the ability to leap to good use as her and her much smaller group began their trek across the plains towards the approaching Americans. God was paying close attention to how her people were handling this; it was their first real-life assignment. The Fourth Mobile Cavalry had only been officially active for two months now after all.

"Craig, take your dagger down around to the south. I want a tight seal around them, got it? No one gets out unless they surrender. You stand back though, don't push them, I know exactly how they would react if we did. This is not going to turn into a firefight if I can help it."

"Yo, God, no prob."

God gave her screen an odd look. Craig's accent, even when speaking Tiri, drove her insane.

"Margaret, take Bravo and go north, meet up with Wolf and make sure you get a tight seal. I'll take care of getting them to stand down before anyone gets hurt."

I hope.

She didn't add that last part though, as her people spread out and began moving towards the positions she had selected for them. God waited for the last of her people to get into position, forming a large perimeter around the moving Americans, before she moved.

Using her suit's sensors, she moved forward to stand directly in the path of the coming Americans. Katya carefully made certain that the plasma rifle mounted over the right shoulder of her suit was pointed upwards, in the inactive position. The pulsar dart gatling cannon which made up the right arm of her suit, she kept pointed downwards. Then she waited, as patiently as the sniper she had been in what seemed like a previous lifetime.

The Americans moved swiftly, and she noted with approval the way that they were keeping to cover as they came, even though it was pitch dark out. God waited until they were well within hearing range, and inside of her trap before opening up.

Not with weapons, but with her power armor's external speakers.

"American troops, you have entered a restricted area. You are ordered to lay down your weapons and accompany us to the base."

The hail of bullets ripped through the night air before her heavily accented English speech was even finished. Katya rolled her eyes as bullets sprang off of her armor. Why had she even thought she could manage to do this with just a warning?

Fine, they want to do it hard, I will do it hard. Emie can't fault me for not trying at least.

"Wolf and Bravo, all units activate your plasma rifles and fire one shot upwards, forty five degree angle should work well."

The plasma bolt would deteriorate into nothing towards the end of its range, two kilometers away. The fighters prudently peeled away from the ground at that.

Twelve seconds later the night sky became day as twenty plasma rifles fired skywards. The hail of bullets ceased, and she watched in amusement as the Americans formed a defensive formation.

"Americans, once again, you are surrounded and outnumbered by a superior force. Surrender your weapons and you will be accompanied to our base."

One of the figures on her heads up display shifted towards her, and spoke up for the first time.

"What will happen then?"

"That will depend on the First Guardian."

There was silence for a moment, then she watched carefully as the man rose and tossed aside his rifle.

Good, I didn't even have to kill anyone this time.

"Hey, you ok?"

Julie stretched and shook her head, wearily trying to find a more comfortable position in her seat.

Strong hands began to slowly massage her shoulders, and she nearly purred in approval as those fingers found the tension spots.

"You can stop that in a few years."

A low laugh next to her ear brought a different sort of tension to her body, and Julie craned her neck around to look up at the First Guardian. Emily was standing behind the chair she had collapsed in as soon as she had arrived, smiling fondly down at her.

"How goes the hunt?"

Julie glared, or tried to anyway, at the taller woman then let her head fall forward as Emily's hands worked their magic.

"We've got a lead, a good one. Don't know what we'll find when we get to New York though."

"How long are you staying here?"

"Hmmm... oh that's good, what? Oh, we're here just for the night, the Major wanted to talk to a few of his contacts and see if they knew anything."

Emily pressed her thumbs into a particularly tense muscle and began trying to get the tension to leave. Guessing by Julie's groans, she would say she was doing a good job. Which rather surprised the First Guardian, since she hadn't thought of massages being high on her list of skills.

"You think the Bak'ra had something to do with the Human Genome Project?"

Emily could feel her friends half-hearted shrug in response.

"I don't know, Emie, but Betty sent some pretty strong evidence to suggest that the Bak'ra on Earth had spent a lot on it. I don't know why either, but we're talking billions of dollars here."

The First Guardian's mind was trying to sort through the possibilities of what that could mean, but she kept on getting distracted by the smooth skin under her fingers.

"They're probably trying to develop another viral weapon, like the one they deployed against us on Tiri Prime."

Emily slid her hands further down the smaller woman's shoulders, marveling at the feeling of touching. The skin under her hands was warm and pliant, and she leaned forward to place a kiss on the nape of Julie's neck.

Sighing in pleasure, Julie tilted her head away, allowing Emily more access, and raised a hand to slide her fingers through Emily's hair. Something which the blue-eyed woman definitely appreciated.

"As much as I am going to hate myself tomorrow for saying this, can we go to sleep now?"

Emily smiled against her skin and nodded, rising and holding out a hand to help the smaller woman to her feet.

"We're both too tired to take this further, but..."

Keeping her eyes locked with the sleepy green eyes in front of her, Emily slipped her hands down around Julie's slim waist. Drawing the petite woman closer, she ducked her head and pressed her lips against the warm inviting ones waiting for her. The kiss grew from a series of nibbles to a heated open-mouthed dual of tongues which left them both gasping when they finally drew back for air.

"Dear God."

Julie whispered, burying her face in Emily's chest, even as the First Guardian held her tightly. Not trusting her voice at the moment, Emie nodded shakily, her knees still feeling a bit weak from that one.

Sweet Maker, what she does to me, and we haven't even made love. I think she's going to kill me when we do though; I'll die of pleasure. They'll have to spend days trying to get the smile off my face.

Gently, Emily pulled back and touched the dark circles under her friend's eyes. She knew there were similar circles under her own; both of them had been pushing their bodies hard the last few months.

"Let's go to sleep, ok? We're both too tired for what we want to do. When I make love to you for the first time, I want to make positive that it's an all night affair."

Wiggling her eyebrows suggestively, she even managed to get a smile out of Julie and a light poke at her stomach.

"Hmph, careful what boasts you make, First Guardian. I'm going to keep you to that one, you know."

Emily was about to reply with a sassy remark when Julie yawned, which of course, she caught. They both shared a tired grin and laced their hands together, the smaller woman tugging her towards the bed in Emily's guest quarters.

"Come on, giant, let's get some sleep or you're going to have to carry me to bed."

"I could."

That earned Emily a chuckle and Julie just tugged her a bit faster towards the bed.

"I know you could."

They both hung up their uniforms and slid under the covers clad in underwear only. Neither one of them felt up to trying a shower, and Julie certainly wasn't up to sleeping in the nude no matter what Emily herself would have preferred.

"Hey, I forgot to ask, why was the base on alert earlier?"

Settling onto her side with a warm length of body pressed up against her front as they spooned together without any conscious decision on their part, it took Emily a moment to remember.

"Oh, that."

Grinning she nuzzled the red hair just in front of her face and happily let her body relax.

"We had an American Special Ops team try to get inside of the base."

"What!?"

Emily tightened her hold to keep Julie from sitting up and soothed her with a kiss.

"Don't worry, no one got hurt. They're being held in guest quarters right now, under guard of course. We'll release them to the authorities tomorrow, er, I mean later today, after I have a talk with their leader."

"Stupid idiots, what the hell did they think they were going to do? Waltz inside of the base?"

"I have a fairly good idea of who wanted them to try anyway."

Julie was silent for a moment, and Emily closed her eyes. Sleep was already calling to her, and it was already four-thirty, local time. She'd have to be up in about three and a half hours to have a talk with the head of the Spec Ops team. Then make certain that the release went well. The Imperial press relations people were having a field day coming up with the best way to do the release, not that Emily was going to listen to them if they wanted her to do something differently than she had already planned. Not unless they had a really good reason.

"You think President Fairchild is behind it?"

Emily nodded tiredly, squeezing the body she held in way of a hug.

"I'm sure he is, this must have had his approval, if not his direct orders. I'll see what I can find out tomorrow."

With one more yawn, she closed her eyes and gladly let sleep overtake her.

Her companion stayed awake for a while longer, trying to piece together something that she knew she should understand. There was something about this which prodded at her, and Julie sighed when it wouldn't come. Finally though, she too let her eyes close and followed her larger friend into sleep. They stayed in each other's embrace until duty dragged them from bed a few short hours later. For that time though, each of them slept well, untroubled by dreams.

Chapter Five

Julie watched in amusement as the crowd below surged forward, or tried to anyway. The Marines in full, unpowered body armor did a very good job of holding them back.

"You sure this is a wise idea?"

The reflection of the First Guardian nodded, her eyes drawn to the scene below as well.

"Yes, I had a good long chat with Captain Kilgore this morning. He didn't say much of course, but what he didn't say was as important as what he did."

Julie smiled at that and shook her head. That hadn't been what she meant, but Emie was thinking only in terms of military tactics and information. Something which she was beginning to understand that the First Guardian always did.

"I meant, are you sure you want to release them like this? To the State Police?"

A low chuckle sounded behind her, and the warmth that Emily's body always seemed to give off radiated along her back. Almost unconsciously, she found herself leaning backwards into that warmth. A glance at the other watchers in the tower cured her of that response though.

"Yes, it seemed poetic. We're releasing them and pressing charges of trespassing. Handing them over in front of the media circus was someone else's idea though."

That someone else was currently paying more attention to a spiky-haired blond than anyone else.

"Well at least God won't be complaining about your brother not being around for a little while."

Emily simply snorted at that, and Julie grinned, looking back down towards the unfolding drama below them. She and the others were in one of the taller buildings which had hastily been constructed above ground at Longbow. Like the other Tiri base's which were scattered across the globe, Longbow had been built to avoid detection. Now that avoiding being spotted by humans was no longer an issue, the base had exploded in growth. It was now one of the main command stations in the rapidly forming Global Defense Force.

"How many reporters do you think are down there?"

Julie asked out loud, but she kept her eyes focused on the reflected blue ones. The redhead had no doubt that even if Weston had heard her, he was far too busy talking to Katya to respond.

"My brother does seem taken with her doesn't he?"

Julie did turn at that, putting the armored transparasteel to her back, and grinned as she looked at the other two.

"Yeah, he does. Is that bad?"

Blue eyes flicked towards Imperial Prince Weston the Fourth, and then back towards the smaller woman standing just inches away from her.

"No, even if she is a bit odd."

Green eyes met blue and both smiled at the same time.

"Well..."

"You know..."

Both of them finished at the same time, already laughing in perfect understanding.

"MARINES!"

The odd looks that they were getting from both Weston and Katya only made them both laugh harder. Months of stress had built up to that and they were leaning against one another by the time that they got themselves under control.

"If you are both quite finished?"

Weston did his best to glower at the two of them, but Julie personally thought that Emily did it better.

"I guess, even if the two of you make it far too easy to make fun of you."

Julie elbowed the taller Guardian trying to get her to behave herself, even as she grinned.

"Don't worry, I'll protect you both from this one."

"Oh really? "

Katya licked her lips and, Julie noted with a bit of a sigh, leaned against Weston's side with no reservation at all.

"Yeah, wanna go at it, God?"

"Don't make me put the fear of God into you, American."

Emily was laughing again by then and Weston sighed, shaking his head.

"Children, Children... Ow!"

Katya grinned unrepentantly after elbowing him, much as Julie had done to Emily earlier and the Prince tried to glare at her as well.

The roar of the crowd drew them all around toward the scene below again.

The Marines had just officially handed over the captured American Spec Ops to the State Troopers. Everyone knew that nothing would come of the charges being laid against them, but that wasn't the point.

Julie studied the chaos below and had to admit it probably was a good move, politically wise. Great publicity for the Empire, and it showed exactly what they thought about the U.S. attempt to invade one of their bases.

"When do you have to leave again?"

Julie did sigh at that one and leaned back against the warm length of the First Guardian.

"In about an hour. We're due in New York City by this afternoon. Betty did some more sifting through the financial records, and managed to track down the accounts to a firm with its office there. You wouldn't believe the number of shell companies she went through to get it."

"Remind me to speak to you about Betty when we have a bit more time. Come on. Let's see about getting some lunch. Weston, Katya, you want to join us in scrounging up some food?"

Emily stretched her six-foot frame and winced as her back realigned itself. Lunch at least had been fun, as had this morning. The day had steadily gone downhill from there.

"Are you positive?"

The large man shifted uncomfortably in a seat which seemed dwarfed by him and shook his head.

"Not a hundred percent."

Emily closed her eyes once more and massaged a temple with her fingers. She'd come back up to North Star shortly after lunch, and had been sifting through reports for most of the afternoon.

It's not fair. We should have another two years, not four months. Sweet Maker, help me, how are we going to do this?

"Darrien, can we be ready by then?"

The other Guardian hesitated, and Emily could almost feel the large man's mind whirring as he thought through everything once more.

"Not with the current battle plan, no."

That's what she had thought as well.

Shit, I hate being right sometimes.

"We'll have to use one of the contingency plans then."

Neither of them mentioned that the contingency plans weren't as likely to succeed.

"Four months give or take a few days, that's the best we can firm it up so far, Emie. They have to have gotten another signal that narrowed down their search patterns a lot. The Bak'ra are heading in a nearly straight line toward us now."

"Well, shit."

"As the humans say, Amen to that."

The sound of liquid being poured caused her to open an eye to see what the other Guardian was up to. She grinned faintly as she watched him pour two shots of Vodka and wordlessly accepted the glass that he offered to her.

"Maker, that's awful stuff."

"Put hair on your chest, First Guardian."

"Oh yeah, that's a real good selling point, Darrien."

They were both silent for a moment, each taken up in their own thoughts. Emily herself was thinking of a certain red-haired human, and wishing she was nearby. Sighing, Emily sat upright and held out her glass for a refill, eyeing the other Guardian.

I miss you, Julie, and you've only been gone a few hours. How can that be?

"So what do we have?"

"Orbital forts should be up and running by then. We'll have the first graduating class of human Guardians, along with of course the Tiri Guardians. There's going to be some serious holes in our formations though, only a few of the support ships are finished."

The First Guardian closed her eyes again as the headache returned. The vodka, she admitted, probably wasn't helping in that regard.

I'm just picturing our battle plans going right out the airlock.

"We can't wait for them to come to us, Darrien. We need to go meet them."

The silence that stretched after that was eloquent. Emily did her best to avoid thinking about what that silence meant.

"I can honestly say that I hate New York City."

Julie laughed at the disgruntled expression on the Major's face and looked back out the window of the Tiri shuttle.

"You just have to get used to it, Major. I liked it when we were stationed here a in the late nineties."

Major Sims ran a hand over his bald head and glared out the same window.

"Every time we come here, something goes wrong."

Julie grinned and shook her head.

"Getting superstitious, Major?"

"Nope, just stating facts, Guardian."

Stretching her legs as much as the small seats would allow, Julie eyed her long-time friend at that.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes, every time we come here something goes wrong."

"We didn't have any problems last time we were here."

At least she didn't think they had any problems when they were stationed here in the nineties.

"I lost that promotion."

Julie scowled in confusion at that.

"What promotion?"

"I was going to head up Majestic, but Whittecker got it instead."

"Major, you can't blame that on being stationed in New York."

"Oh yeah? Watch me, Julie."

Julie watched the shadow land with a bemused expression. The Major had odd ideas on occasion, but he was a good man.

"Who are we going to visit?"

"A company that Betty sent us some info on. It's called Gentech. Judging by its tax statements, it's a pretty big company. Headquarters are downtown, near the twin towers."

Seeking the link to her ship self was not instinctive yet, but it was getting there. She wasn't as quick as the First Guardian to search through that link from far away, but that would come as well. The amount of information stored in Southern Cross's data banks still surprised her though.

"It's going to be a bitch getting down there through the traffic."

"Ha, traffic? Who said we were going by land?"

The shuttle gently touched down at Newark airport before Julie could ask what he meant by that. She gave him a slightly confused look though as she followed him out of the shuttle's hatch and down to the tarmac below. An army helicopter a few hundred feet away began to spin its blades as she watched. Julie glanced at the Major with a questioning expression and he grinned.

"I called in a few favors."

"Oh yeah, and we all know how much I love helicopter rides. Those stupid Osprey's are bad enough."

Grabbing their bags, they both hunched over against the wind and hurried towards the waiting helicopter, her four Honor Guard members grimly falling in behind her.

"Ecuador was a fuck up, no way around that one, Julie

Julie winced at that one, and decided to ignore the memories that comment stirred up.

"Let's just get this over with."

A half hour later, Julie emerged from the helicopter, shaky, but not too much worse for the ride. Thankfully, she hadn't had to use her airsickness bag this time, but it had been close once or twice. She truly had no problem with traveling by airplane, but helicopter rides were not fun at all.

"You going to live?"

Julie groaned and resisted the urge to try and wipe the smirk off the Major's face.

I promised, Emie, I would be good. Sometimes though, being good sucks.

"Nice landing spot."

The police, who had roped off the intersection that they had used as a helipad, were watching them with a mixture of awe and resentment. She decided she didn't even want to know how the Major had gone about getting them to do that.

"Not too subtle though was it?"

The intersection in question had been located a half block from the front of the building that they were headed towards. Gentech owned the top fifteen floors, and through a series of shell companies, owned the rest of the building as well. A nice non-descript thirty-story skyscraper didn't look much different from any of the others in the area.

"The point wasn't supposed to be subtle. We're here on official business, Julie. We're going in with trumpets blaring. The rest of the team should have been in place an hour ago."

A glance at the four Marines in full battle-dress trooping behind them settled that point at least.

Yeah, I guess I can't be too subtle with these guys following me around everywhere.

The guards at the front desk barely had time to gawk at them as the Major flashed a badge and strode right past them as if they were little more than statues. Julie did her best not to grin as one of those guards tried to intercept her. Her Marine Honor Guards intercepted him smoothly, and not so smoothly brushed him aside.

"I'm jealous, you got a badge?" she quietly muttered as she followed the major towards the banks of elevators.

"Imperial Intelligence, all neat and fancy, I. I. People are already having fun with the acronyms."

Julie's shoulders were shaking as she made her way into the elevator behind the larger Major. The four Honor Guards filled the rest of the large elevator, and her contingent leader, a large fellow from Ohio named Chris Ryes, held up a hand to stop an accountant from following them in.

"Sorry, Ma'am, but I think you want to take the next one."

There were, Julie admitted, some advantages to having heavily armed Marines following her around everywhere.

"What floor we going to?"

The Major double-checked the hard copy he had printed out and brought with him then punched the twentieth floor button.

"Might as well start at their reception area and work our way up. See what we can ferret out. The rest of the team should be in position by now, and they'll nail anyone who tries to get out."

"Lovely plan, you think it'll work?"

The Major grinned and patted his sidearm with a shrug.

"Eh, if it doesn't, we'll come up with something else."

"Oh great, we're winging it again aren't we? You know I hate it when we do that."

"Yeah, yeah, whine, whine."

Julie grinned and leaned back against the back of the elevator, blinking her eyes as she focused on the Major. Her mind was having a hard time sticking to one thought, and she frowned as she wondered if the lack of sleep was finally catching up to her or if she was coming down with a cold. The constant travel of the past few days, despite the lay over at Longbow, was starting to wear on her, but she was usually better able to cope with it.

Frowning as she steadied herself against another dizzy spell, she found her thoughts once more wandering. The past few days, chasing down leads with the Major and his team, had been almost like De-ja-vu.

Just like old times again, except we actually have the full backing of a government now.

Almost as if he had read her thoughts, the Major nodded towards the heavily armed and armored Marines.

"Nice to have such capable back up isn't it?"

"For a change, yes."

"Speaking of capable back up, how's the First Guardian doing?"

The question came a bit out of nowhere, and Julie wondered if she was the only one having problems keeping her thoughts straight. With an irritated glance towards the floor indicators

above the door, she wondered how much longer the stupid elevator ride was going to take. They seemed to be moving pretty darn slow. Something about that should have raised alarm bells in her mind, but the odd dizziness kept getting in the way. She focused on the Major's question.

"Stressed, but pretty good. Hard to tell how she's really doing since I get all of like five minutes alone with her, on a good day that is."

The slight edge in her voice was not lost on the Major, and to tell the truth she was a bit surprised by it as well. She was not in the habit of letting her emotions show while on assignment. With a sigh, she shook her head, ignoring the slightly puzzled look being shot her way, and immediately regretted the move. The dizziness got worse, and she leaned back heavily against the back of the elevator. The Marines thought far too much of themselves to actually look like they were paying attention, but she was more than aware of their presence at the moment. This wasn't the place for that kind of conversation.

"Don't worry, Major. It's just kind of..."

She blinked as one of the Marines wavered.

"Steffens? You ok?"

"Umm, yeah, just kind of dizzy I think I'm..."

Whatever the rest of his sentence was going to be, she'd never find out. The Marine swayed one way, then the other and kept right on going, falling sideways into the Marine next to him. The elevator slowed to a halt, then began going down, fast. The alarms which had been silent before began ringing full tilt in her mind.

"Shit, Major, it's a trap!"

The Major nodded grimly, trying to pry open the control panel under the elevator controls. His movements had the studied carefulness of someone who did not totally trust his body to do what he wished it to do. Chris was trying to raise someone, anyone, on his communicator, but he managed only a disgusted snarl before slumping forward as well. Julie was starting to feel more than a bit dizzy and blinked as she focused on staying upright. Something which was becoming quite hard.

Her last memory was the Major cursing and the remaining Marine trying to get the doors open as they went below the sub basement listed on the glowing buttons mounted above the elevator doors. Her fading thought was to wonder why they were still going down. Then the world went black.

I tried to stay out of trouble, Emie, I swear I did...

She'd managed to carve some time out for a nap late that afternoon, ship time. She had a formal dinner to attend later on that evening, with her father in China. A political show of force, she thought anyway. Something she was just required to show up to and do her usual update on the military side of things.

Her dreams though, those were disturbing. She dreamed of a dark space closing in on her, suffocating her and dragging her down into its depths. Dark, shark-like shapes waited for her in those depths, and she tossed and turned.

When the shrill call of a priority com signal dragged her from her dreams, she woke up feeling uneasy and on edge. The dreams still clawed at the edge of her consciousness.

Licking her lips, the First Guardian ran a hand through her sweat-drenched hair and then reached for the com panel. Her heart slowed from its wild pounding as she instinctively tested the link with her ship self. Everything was fine aboard North Star, and she felt a bit of her tension leave. Punching the accept key, she waited for the unit to acknowledge her identity and then light up. The worried face of her Provost greeted her.

"Angwar? What's wrong?"

Even before he spoke, she knew.

Julie...Oh, dear Maker, no, not again.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Emily, but there's been a problem I think you should know about."

Sitting up, she reached for her discarded uniform jacket with one hand, her eyes never leaving the screen. Angwar swallowed and hesitated a moment, before continuing. A fist of fear formed in her stomach.

"We've just lost contact with Major Sims' team. Southern Cross switched to manual controls and secondary systems twelve minutes ago."

Blue eyes hardened at that. If Julie's ship body had reverted to manual and secondary controls, it meant that the Guardian was not able to keep up the link. Which meant she was unconscious, or...

No, she's not dead. I would know if she was dead, I would feel it inside me.

"Get the rapid reaction team on it, Angwar. I'm taking a shuttle out there right now. I want her last location and the details of her movements routed to me en route."

Blue eyes, pale already with rage at anyone who would dare try to hurt Julie, narrowed dangerously as her Provost cleared his throat.

"We just got a transmission a few minutes ago Ma'am. President Fairchild has declared that any unauthorized flight into U.S. airspace by an Imperial vessel will be viewed as an act of war."

Emily stared at her Provost as if he had gone insane.

"WHAT?"

Angwar swallowed and did his best not to flinch from the sheer fury staring at him. A Lieutenant sitting a few feet away from him shifted away from the screen nervously. The first Guardian's tone promised pain, and lots of it, to whoever had raised her ire.

"We just relayed the message to the Emperor and Prince Weston. Do you want to send the rapid reaction team still?"

Emily ground her teeth together in mute fury.

"No, but I will be returning to Longbow. From there I will be taking land transport to New York City."

Angwar straightened and prepared to salute and carry out her orders when the frozen slice of fury that was her voice stopped him.

"Angwar, tell the President that if something happens to a Guardian because of his orders, *I* will consider it an act of war."

I'm on my way, Julie. I swear, I will turn the entire city into rubble if someone hurts you.

Chapter Six

All I know is this, no way am I getting between the First Guardian and where she wants to go. That's just a sure fire way to get you into all sorts of trouble.

~Imperial Marine Colonel

It was six in the morning by the time Emily started her descent onto Governor's Island. Her original plans to take a drop ship down to Longbow Base had changed at the last minute. Instead of dropping to the base in North Dakota and then taking land transport to Manhattan, she'd decided to cut out the land transport phase entirely.

President Fairchild had decreed that any unauthorized drop into U.S. airspace would be viewed as an act of war. Emily felt her lips curl into a snarl as she double-checked her straps.

He wants to play hardball, fine, we'll play hardball, and I guarantee that he has no idea who he is pissing off.

"Ma'am, we're clear to drop whenever you want."

The pilot, Ilthiron, or Ile as he liked to be called, was talking to her. She wrenched her attention away from the desire to strangle a certain politician and nodded in return.

"Get me down planet side, Pilot, and do it fast."

"Yes, Ma'am, dropping now."

The ungainly box shaped craft dropped out of the Guardian Class ship, as the massive blast doors opened below it. The magnetic clamps above it which had held it to the ship released with a dull, familiar clang. Emily tightened her hold on the armrests and concentrated on not letting her rage get the better of her.

It was a difficult battle.

The drop ship was full of armed Marines, all of whom were double-checking their unpowered armor and weapons. Two other drop ships followed hers out of her ship self's drop bays. Each of which were loaded with Marines, one of which had a Dagger of jump troops onboard.

The craft bucked as it slammed into the upper atmosphere. Her eyes flicked towards the pilot and copilot in the front of the small ship, and she sighed as she suddenly recognized the pilot. She should have known Ile would have found a way to be involved in this. *As long as he gets me down in one piece, I won't even comment about his little mishap over Quebec.*

Red light seeped across her area as the view port next to her began to glow. To anyone below, the three ships would look like shooting stars as they screamed across the sky. Inside of the ships, their crews were buffeted as the fast drop rattled them. Emily double-checked her mental bond with her ship self, more out of habit than anything else. Angwar had stayed aboard her to keep an eye on the new recruits, and she trusted him to sort things out while she was away.

They were sticking to the letter of President Fairchild's statement. The craft was dropping straight downwards from the high orbit that North Star had been in, towards the island at the tip of Manhattan. It was at the limit of a drop ships capabilities, and the high-pitched whine of their plasma engines made Emily's teeth ache. The Americans wouldn't even have to try to blow them out of the sky if one of those plasma engines's failed though. They were at maximum output to do what Emily had ordered, and if one failed, the other one was quite likely to simply rip the ship into small pieces.

"Ma'am?"

Ile didn't even try yelling over the turbulence, he used her armor suit's com system to talk to her.

"I've got a communiqué for you from Governor's Island. We're also being challenged by NORAD, what should I tell them?"

Emily flicked on her own com screen to take the call from Governor's Island, while snarling at Ile.

"Tell them to stick it up their asses. We're dropping down to an Imperial island."

The faintly amused face watching her from the com screen shook his head and sighed.

"First Guardian, I hope you're pilots don't tell the Americans that word for word. I thought you had been taught better."

It was a measure of how worried she was about Julie that Emily did little more than offer one of her former academy instructors a small smile in greeting.

"Theo, good to see you again. Our ETA is in ten minutes, how are things down there?"

The white-haired man shook his head and his eyes flicked towards something outside of the visual field.

"The Coast Guard and a few ships of the American Navy have begun patrolling the area between the island and Manhattan. We bought this place to use it as a training facility and a recruiting center. Darn hard to do more recruiting when they won't let anyone get here!"

The island located just past the southern tip of Manhattan had been used as an Army base originally. It had then become a Coast Guard base. When even the Coast Guard gave up and left, the entire island had been offered up for sale by the government, starting back during Bush Junior's presidency. Guardian Command had bought the place not long after the Tiri's existence was made known.

"I know, Theo, I know. Things will be sorted out soon enough, I hope anyway. I'm bringing down a dagger each of Marines and jump troops to help out just incase, along with some more equipment for you. I'm going to need a way to get onto the island of Manhattan though. Julie's somewhere there, and I need to find her before she gets her self into any more trouble."

Theo's brown eyes narrowed slightly as he thought, and Emily was gradually aware that they had stopped being tossed about so much, which meant that they were through the upper layers of atmosphere and had slowed enough to begin their approach down to the Island. Impatiently she tapped a finger against her armrest, waiting for Theo to come up with a suggestion. If he didn't, she had a few of her own, but most of them involved a bit of bloodshed if the NYC authorities didn't let her pass.

"Well, I suppose I could find something to sneak you through, Emie. It's not going to be a fun ride though, but it should get you to Manhattan all right. Won't work for more than four people though."

Emily glanced at the cockpit and the way that Ile was fighting the controls to keep the drop ship heading straight downward at a speed that wouldn't kill them all.

"Fine, I'll see you soon, Theo, one way or the other."

Killing the connection, Emily ignored the battle being fought by the pilots of each drop ship. That was out of her hands, and she didn't have time or energy to waste worrying about what could happen. If something went wrong at the moment, she most likely would never know what happened.

There were more important things than her own death to keep her mind focused on at the moment anyway. Like what she was going to do to whoever had kidnapped Julie.

"Ma'am?"

Some of what Emily was thinking about must have shown on her face, because the communications officer inched backwards in her chair, eyes wide in sudden worry.

"Yes?"

It wasn't quite a snarl, but it came quite close, and Emily forced herself to take a deep breath before trying again.

"What is it?"

"Umm... well, the Americans are warning us off, saying that we are entering their airspace. I told them our destination was an Imperial installation; they don't seem to care, Ma'am. I've got an AWACS radar plane lighting us up from forty miles out, and four F-16s coming up fast from the south."

Emily's eyes narrowed and she scowled at the poor Com officer, who was doing her level best to try and become part of the bank of equipment behind her.

"Transfer them to my screen."

"Yes, Ma'am."

The com officer sounded quite happy doing something, anything, that got the First Guardian looking somewhere else. Emily's glare was transferred towards her com panel, and the Air Force Captain who was looking back up at her out of it; a part of her was slightly impressed that the Air Force had managed to upgrade their communications equipment to Tiri standards already. Before the man had a chance to open his mouth and speak, Emily snapped at him. She had long ago learned that a preemptive attack worked wonders sometimes.

"You are threatening military action against an Imperial ship on an emergency mission. If you do not cease such threats, we will take your actions as an act of war, and deal with your base, and airplanes, accordingly."

It was not an empty threat. If they tried to stop her from getting down to start her search for Julie, she'd gladly have one of the Orbital forts wipe them from the face of the Earth with an orbital kinetic strike. The drop ships themselves had been altered in the last few months to be able to

jam the more primitive radar systems used by humans. Combined with the weaponry onboard, they could handle themselves against the F-16 interceptors. The man's mouth clicked shut and he stared at her with an astonished look that might have been amusing if she hadn't been so furious at the moment.

"Furthermore, tell your superiors that if they continue to disregard the Imperial Treaty which the United States signed, we will withdraw all aid which was stated in that treaty. I will personally make certain that every other country in the world gets ahead of you, got it?"

The man nodded and she killed the connection before he had opened his mouth to share whatever opinion he had on the matter with her. He was doing his level best to avoid chuckling, but Emily could see his shoulders shake even through the skin suit he wore to protect against sudden depressurization.

"There. They hail us again, you relay it to North Star and have Angwar deal with them. They'll probably be too busy trying to figure out what to do about us to actually try and stop us before we hit the island though."

The com officer nodded, although Emily had said it to let the rest of the drop ships crew know what was going on. An informed crew, as far as she was concerned, tended to work better.

"And if they so much as twitch at us, we'll blow them right out of the sky. Let me know if those F-16s line up for an attack run."

"Ah, Ma'am?"

"Yes?"

"Well, see, it's just that I've been tapping into the AWACS transmissions."

Emily grinned slightly at the hesitant tone being used by the com officer. It wasn't exactly illegal, but the American's would be disturbed to learn how easy it was for the Empire to break their communications scramble. The com officer seemed to be waiting for her to continue so the First Guardian not so subtly nudged her.

"And?"

"They're ordering the F-16s to circle our airspace and do nothing as long as we stay on our current decent pattern."

"Good, figured that little chat would make them hesitate."

She looked back down at her panel and called up a map of their landing area, speaking to the pilot this time.

"He, now get me down there!"

Emily felt her face twist into a wolfish smile as she began memorizing a map of New York City.

The com officer, a young human from Alberta, Canada, would remember, to her dying day, the way the First Guardian smiled at that moment. She would often wake up shaking, remembering the cold blue eyes which promised pain to those who had dared take someone she cared for.

The smell of food drew her back from the blackness.

For a wonderful moment she thought she was back at Mars Base, having dinner with Emily. She'd nodded off somehow and was now waking up to find the First Guardian watching her with laughter in those incredibly deep blue eyes.

Then the memories of what had happened in the elevator came flooding back.

God, I wish I were at Mars Base with Emie. I swear, Emily, I tried to stay out of trouble, and I didn't do anything this time!

Which was very nearly the exact same thing she had been thinking when she the darkness had swallowed her in the elevator. Doing her level best to act as if she were still unconscious, the red-haired woman slit open one eye just barely wide enough to get a glimpse of what was in front of her, and little more. She dared not reveal that she was awake if she could avoid it.

"Ms. McGrath, how nice of you to come and visit us."

Damn, that worked well.

Julie gave up the pretense of still being out of it, and opened both eyes to look at the area around her. The voice had sounded familiar, but the scene in front of her was puzzling enough that she didn't wonder at it.

A long table covered with silver platters and candles in elaborate gold candlesticks covered the snow-white tabletop. The table itself was nearly twenty feet long, and high-backed wooden chairs were arranged along either side with a more ornate one situated at the other end opposite Julie. The gaunt white-haired man watching her from that seat was one she was familiar with though.

"General Whittecker."

Her mind was still moving a bit slowly and jerking from one topic to another, as it had in the elevator. The gas, whatever it had been, was still in her system to some extent. Julie reached out with her mind and touched her bond with her ship self. Southern Cross was still there, but the link was blurry, like it was out of focus. He must have noticed her slight frown at that, and leaned forwards, tapping the top of his fingers against the tabletop.

Julie had a sudden flashback of sitting in the basement of the building Majestic had used for headquarters. Watching the large gaunt man who was telling her that her parents were dead, and she was going to be raised by *them* now.

The image left as swiftly as it had come and Julie swallowed against bile.

"We left your ship link fairly intact, Ms. McGrath. Don't worry, I didn't use Cynaomarist. It's much more pleasant being able to talk to you when your mind isn't quite that clouded."

As always, the words were said so softly that she nearly had to strain to hear them. Unfortunately they were the truth. Her hands, she discovered when she raised her right one to rub the back of her neck, weren't bound to the chair. Cynaomarist had been the drug that Emie had been given by Liric, and nearly completely blocked a Guardian's bond to their ship self. Whatever he had given her was not that complete, but still she couldn't manage to send a message through her link.

"How kind of you, General."

Her sarcasm was as heavily laced as she could manage at the moment.

"A pity you have not learned to respect your superiors after all this time, Ms. McGrath. I had hoped that you would have at least learned a bit of humility and respect after these past few years."

Julie stared at him in disbelief.

"Are you out of your mind? I've been tracking you down to arrest you, not take orders from you."

Maybe she was still feeling the after effects of the gas more strongly than she had thought. That would be one of the few explanations for why the General was acting as if he expected her to salute him. The others all involved him going insane, and whatever else he was, his actions had been those of someone in total control of his mental facilities.

There is a knife on the table, I could get it and maybe get out of here somehow. Please, Emie, please be on the way. I don't know what's going on here, but It's not good.

"Don't bother trying to get away, Ms. McGrath, you would not make it more than a pace at the most. I have some excellent guards keeping an eye on you at the moment, along with the ever too efficient Major Sims."

Something large and bulky moved in the shadows surrounding the room. Julie swallowed as the low rumbling sound of metal sliding against metal reached her ears. Whatever that had been, it had been rather large, and definitely not humanoid. Swallowing, Julie tried not to keep her imagination from running away with her.

"The company was a set up then?"

If the General was going to be so good as to answer her questions, Julie was going to do her damndest to find out what was going on. That and if she could keep the lunatic talking she'd give Emily more time to find her.

The lunatic in question regarded her calmly through pale gray eyes which she had an unnerving suspicion understood exactly what she was trying to do. Either she was wrong or he didn't care, for after a moment he spoke once more.

"Of course it was, Ms. McGrath, do you think I would be so foolish as to leave that much information out where Betty could find it? I am many things, but sloppy is not one of them."

There was just the barest hint of annoyance in that quiet voice, the first hint of emotion she'd heard from him so far. There was a sharp looking steak knife on the table top, set next to the plate in front of her. If she could manage to swipe it without him noticing, and hide it on her somewhere, she'd be armed, after a fashion.

Keeping her mind focused on ways to deal with the situation was keeping the fear at bay, but she could still feel it. Lurking at the edge of her subconscious, waiting for a foothold.

"I don't understand why you spent all that money on the human genome project though. You didn't need all that information just to make a virus did you?"

The fact that the General was answering her questions so easily was starting to worry Julie. Something was going on that was seriously out of whack, and she didn't have any clue what it was.

General Whittecker, for his part, calmly poured himself a glassful of the amber-colored liquid and uncovered the dish set before him. Calmly he took a sip of the liquid, acting almost like a wine connoisseur, before answering her question.

"What do you remember of your parents?"

That had not been an answer she had expected, and green eyes narrowed as she wondered what he was talking about.

"They were killed when I was younger, you know that as well as anyone. Why?"

Memories of her parents swirled through her mind, vague and unfocused. They were little more than blurs of color and shape to her, like an often looked at picture. The quiet voice of the General brushed the memories back into their corners.

"We used the genetic data provided by the human genome project for some interesting things."

A hint of a smile crossed his thin face, while the sensation of being out of control continued to build inside of her. A cyclone of fear at what he was talking about whirling inside of her.

Some of that must have shown on her face, for the General leaned forward and the small smile grew.

"You don't actually think they were your real parents do you, Ms. McGrath? Or that you're completely human? We built you, you see. What fortune to find out that you had the gift, as the Tiri call it. Now I'm going to use you as bait, and then I'm going to offer this pitiful excuse for a planet up as a gift to the coming Bak'ra fleet."

Her mind refused to accept what he had just said, and she desperately clung onto only the last bit of his statement.

"You're insane. They'll kill you also!"

This time the fear rose swiftly inside of her and nearly choked her as a full rictus smile spread across the gaunt face across from her.

"You still don't understand do you, Ms. McGrath? I only look human. Soon enough I'll undo the genetic alterations we were forced to submit ourselves to and become a superior being once more. A Bak'ra."

"You have got to be joking."

Emily felt her lips curl back in a sneer at what Theo had brought her to see. She pointed an incredulous finger at the half finished looking craft.

"You want me to take that?"

Theo had a slightly sheepish expression on his face as he too stared at the craft. She could've sworn she heard him mutter something along the lines of, I didn't think it looked that bad.

"First Guardian, it's either that or we force our way across the bay to Manhattan. This at least will get you to the island unseen."

"If it doesn't sink you mean."

Theo simply shrugged at that and Emily sighed, turning back to glare at the thing. She really wasn't certain what to call it. It looked like someone had taken a small American min sub, and then started grafting on Tiri technology. The entire thing had a vaguely grotesque look. No one would think it was beautiful.

Unless they like that Geiger fellow, then they might like this. Dear Maker, the thing will probably sink like a rock.

"Emie, it's all we have. I wish I could offer you a better suggestion, but I can't unless you want to reconsider just using the drop ships...?"

It was a tempting suggestion and the First Guardian ran a hand through her black hair, wishing she could use it.

"No, Theo, as much as I would love to, I can't. We're on the edge with the U.S. as it is, and that would just give them the perfect excuse to pull out of the treaty. Not that they seem to be honoring it at the moment anyway. Still, Weston and Father's jobs are difficult enough as is at the moment, and I don't want to give them an interstellar incident on top of everything else."

With one last glare at the hybrid machine, and a mental wince, Emie shook her head and started towards the door, her Honor Guard keeping a respectful distance behind her; the First Guardian was not in a good mood and they knew better than to crowd her.

"Victor wanted me to ask you over for dinner."

Emily arched an eyebrow in the direction of her former teacher as they continued up the path towards the main building. The ongoing construction echoed across the once silent island. Despite the current tensions recruits were busy training in the several acres of clear grass area in the center of the island. The shouts of drill instructors could be heard across the entire small island.

"Does he not know what's been going on these past few weeks?"

The older man smiled and shook his head as the small group stopped, letting a cadre of trainee's march past.

"Emie, he's been working twelve to sixteen hours a day at the regeneration clinic in New York. You know how focused he gets; I don't even think he realizes that he can't come back here yet. It'll dawn on him when he goes down the ferry and tries to get a ride across of course, but until then, Maker only knows."

"When we can then, Theo, I think I would like that."

"Bring that young human with you as well. I'd like to meet her."

Emily wondered what Julie would make of Theo and Victor.

"You'll meet her when I pull her ass out of trouble in New York. Get that thing ready to go, I want to get moving as soon as possible."

Theo chuckled and walked alongside her as they went to fetch the rest of their equipment.

"I have absolute faith in your ability to pull her out of trouble. Glad to see you're still rescuing maidens in distress."

Emie glared at her friend at that, and grabbed her equipment pack. The three members of her Honor Guard who would be accompanying her took up theirs as well.

"Knock that off, Theo. We'll get changed into something a bit more in keeping with walking around New York. You just make certain that thing of yours will get us there without sinking in the Hudson. I do *Not* want to swim in that river, you got me?"

"Whatever you want, First Guardian. I'll make certain we have a charade set up to screw with the American satellite images."

"Just hurry, Theo, I don't know what Julie's gotten herself into now, but I'm sure she's in the middle of whatever is going on."

Her evil glare, sadly, was wasted on Theo, as the older man had turned around and was heading back the way they had come to give orders and prep the odd craft for departure.

"Great, this is just going to be loads of fun."

She peeked into the equipment pouch Theo had provided for them and shook her head once more at the clothes he had provided. Showing up in her uniform was not what she had in mind when she thought of subtle. Her Honor Guard members were already grumbling about what they had been given.

Well at least he gave me jeans to wear. I would have had to kill him if he gave me a dress. What else is in here? Ah, good, sneakers.

"First Guardian!"

Waving for the three Marines who were coming with her to keep changing, she turned towards the Private who was hurrying her way.

"Yes, Private?"

"Imperial Prince Weston is on the com for you."

She'd been expecting his com, and Emily was starting to wonder what was taking her brother so long.

"I'll take it out here, Private."

"Yes, Ma'am."

One of her Honor Guard members who was not going with her, Francine, had already set up a full sized com screen for her. It was but the work of a few moments to access the com and raise her brother's transmission, after going through security protocols; which were fairly pointless

when one was a Guardian of course, but that was no reason to give Internal Affairs a heart attack unless she had to.

"Weston, make it short, I'm out of here as soon as Theo has our transportation ready."

"No problem, Emie, I've got that info you wanted. It took a bit of digging, but you were right. We have a few Tiri citizens who are currently living in New York. One of whom is our good friend, Jenner."

Emily felt her eyebrow raise in surprise at that little bit of information.

"Jenner? How the hell did he manage to get permission to live in New York?"

"I don't know, Emie, but I've already asked that it be looked into. Someone probably thought, rightly so, that no one would believe Jenner if he did spill anything. Still he must have fell through a loophole somewhere to manage it, and I'll make certain we find out how. I'm transmitting his address to you now. He should know what's going on, or at least heard rumors."

Emie nodded as she bent down and tugged off her boots. She'd change inside, but every second might count and she was determined to leave the moment they could.

"I'll call you when we have something, Weston. How's the rest of the world doing?"

"Eh, hanging in there so far. Germany and France are going to stick with us. Britain is wavering, but I think they'll stay despite whatever the U.S. does. I'm more worried about what message this will send to the third world countries that we haven't sealed a treaty with. This pretty much couldn't have come at a worse time, Emie. Father is tied down in Asia, dealing with the Chinese and their continued charter of rights violations. It's a mess out there, and between you and me, I'm glad I don't have to deal with them."

Theo had reemerged from the warehouse at the edge of the island and was waving up at them. Changing her mind she grabbed the rest of her clothing and the pack, she could just as well change down there as she could up here.

"I've got to go, Weston. Give Father my love, and take care."

"Good hunting, Emie. Try not to get us into a war with the Americans though, ok?"

"I'm so very close to just bombing Washington D.C. back into the Stone Age, Weston, so don't even tempt me."

"Some days I'd say that would be doing the rest of us a favor, but do try to resist the urge. Bye, Emie."

Emily was already moving as the screen went dark, hurrying back down towards the waterfront. Her Marines had already changed and were carrying normal backpacks, looking quite the part of

tourists, and looking either horrified or embarrassed. *The 'I love New York' t-shirts were a nice touch*, she thought.

Time to get this show on the road.

Chapter Seven

Only way I want to face a Bak'ra Battle Drone is from orbit with a kinetic strike.

~Imperial Marine General.

Julie felt numb.

The world as she had known it had been filled with only a few rock hard truths. One of which was that she was human, and had a special gift. The last one had taken a bit of a beating during her meeting with the Tiri, but it had survived relatively unscathed. If what Whittecker said was true though, the one thing she had always known was true, wasn't. Not only were her parents not her parents, but she was also the enemy that Emily hated with such passion.

He's lying. I'm not one of them, I can't be. I passed all of those medical tests with flying colors. No. Please God, don't let him be telling the truth. Emie... Emie, you're walking into a trap my love.

She did her best to shove that aside for the moment. There was precious little she could do right then. Minutes spent trying to force a warning through her drug-blocked link to Southern Cross had only managed to give her a headache. The General had seemed amused by her shock and had taken his leave a few seconds later, summoned by some invisible signal. For now she was alone with the shadows that moved along the edge of the room. Since none of them were moving into the light or getting any closer, she took her chance.

The sharp steak knife was slid up her sleeve, and she did her best to make certain it wouldn't slide back down or cut her by mistake. Ignoring the rumbling in her stomach, she'd taken a peek under the covered dish in front of her and found it contained what looked like steak; she tried to focus on studying the room around her. Considering what Bak'ra meant in Tiri, she really didn't want to know what kind of meat it was.

There were, as far as she could tell, three of whatever those things in the shadows were. A hint of light shining off metal was her only indication of what they could have been. For that, Julie was thankful. What little she had seen had been on the edge of revolting.

Come on, Julie; think! There has to be some way to warn Emie before she walks into a trap, or help her.

She played back the odd conversation that she'd had with Whittecker before he'd gone. Trying to find something that could help her get out of this. Unfortunately, nothing came to mind.

Like most of her conversations with the General, this one had been confusing.

"We've been here for a long time, Ms. McGrath, much longer than the Tiri. Our craft malfunctioned and found this pitiful ball of earth in 1908, nearly crashing in Tunguska, Siberia. Since then we've influenced everything from the first to the second world wars. Amazing what a war will do to push humans into making scientific advances."

She'd had the disturbing feeling that the General had been trying to give her a history lesson. Why he wanted to, she wasn't entirely certain at the moment. The return of the General jerked her out of her attempts at planning.

"Seems that the First Guardian just dropped down to Governor's Island. Right on time, I might add. I believe it's time to show you to your room, Ms. McGrath."

Emily and her three Marines eyed the building in front of them. The First Guardian raised an eyebrow at the peep show place that was above the address she'd been given for Jenner. The address itself turned out to be a pawnshop, something she had not been surprised to find out. The entire set up seemed so very Jenner. Checking the wristwatch that Theo had given her, she grimaced, nine o'clock already.

"First Guardian, this is the place?"

"Afraid so, Tom, I'll deal with Jenner. Just make certain that we aren't bothered."

Of the three Marines, Tom was the only one who was not Tiri. He'd been born not far from here in New Jersey, which had been one of the reasons that Emily had taken him with her.

Wrinkling her nose against the smell, Emily carefully made her way down the cement stairs, avoiding a stain at the bottom that looked, and smelled, suspiciously like someone having used the stairs as a bathroom.

Jenner spotted her the moment she came through the doorway. If he'd stayed behind the cage set up around the cash register he could have delayed the inevitable. As it was, he did exactly what she expected him to and tried to bolt.

Throwing open a side door, the thin man ducked under the cage and sprinted towards the rear of the shop.

"Now, now, is that anyway to greet an old friend, Jenner?"

Striding forward, Emily grabbed the nearest heavy object at hand, an ashtray, and threw it like a Frisbee. It hit him just above the rear of his left knee, and the thud as he hit the ground was rather satisfying. Clarice slammed the door to the shop shut behind them and flipped over the sign to closed, while Emily strode forwards.

"Leaving already, Jenner? We haven't even had our friendly little chat."

"Do you have any idea how much that stung you bit... gack."

Emily grabbed him by the throat and helped him to his feet, squeezing off the end of his sentence.

"Tsk, ts, Jenner. You really don't want to piss me off more than I already am. So how about you play nice and tell me everything you know about Gentech?"

Jenner reminded Emily of nothing so much as a rat, with less hair that was. His squeak of surprise as she shook him by the neck did nothing to help his image.

"Don't know anything!"

Blue eyes hardened and Emie slammed him up against the metal cage. The rattle was almost as satisfying as the yelp that Jenner let out as he hit.

"Let's try this again. I need to know everything you know about Gentech and what they've been up to."

Jenner's eyes darted back and forth, and the thin man licked his lips.

"Look, they'll kill me if I tell you anything!"

Blue eyes turned the color of ice and Emily's smile was nothing but a baring of her teeth.

"Amusing to think that you are more afraid of what they'll do, than what I'm going to do."

Keeping a firm grip on his throat, Emily reached behind her and slid her dart pistol from the backpack she wore.

"I'm going to count until twenty, and then you're going to either tell me what I need to know, or I'm going to remove your head."

Placing the muzzle of the gun to his temple she started counting, while Jenner did a great job of sweating on her hand.

"One, two, three, four, five..."

"Wait! For the love of the Maker, wait! Why come here when you already know that's where the human girl's being held?"

Emily slammed Jenner's head back against the cage with a growl.

"When did I ever say I was looking for a human girl, hmm?"

"Ah, I mean, stop hitting me, that hurts a lot!"

"Jenner, that's the point. Now, what have you heard?"

"Just that some Imperial team got disappeared."

Emily's lip twitched.

"Ten, Eleven, Twelve..."

"You know where she is, why do you need me to tell you anything?"

"Because I want to rescue her, not get caught in whatever happened to her. Fifteen, Sixteen, Seventeen..."

Flicking her thumb she activated the power coil to the small pistol and slipped a finger into the trigger guard.

"Goodbye, Jenner, I won't say that I'll miss you."

"Wait! Ok! I'll tell you what I know, just don't shoot ok?"

"Talk fast, Jenner, I think I've counted up to eighteen. Which means you only get two seconds worth of hesitating."

"Look, I don't know too much, just what I've heard."

Emily opened her mouth to ask what exactly he'd heard when Tom interrupted her.

"First Guardian, look what I found."

Keeping a firm grip on Jenner and encouraging him not to move by thrusting the muzzle against his ear again, Emily glanced towards the Marine. Arching an eyebrow at the equipment he was holding up. Slamming Jenner's head against the cage once more Emily snarled at him.

"Jenner, you piece of scum. I know that's not a dart pistol he's holding, because if it is, I'm going to seriously hurt you."

"It was a gift!"

Emily slammed him again and snarled.

"Don't lie to me, Jenner, or I'll find more creative ways to hurt you."

Clarice came back in from the back room, nodding to the First Guardian when she met her eyes.

"He's got bags packed, looks like he was getting ready to leave."

Emily turned back towards the now profusely sweating Jenner.

"Where was I, oh yes, eighteen, nineteen..."

"They're some sort of genetic company been around for a while. Some big shots were buying up embryos a few decades ago. They used to come out with a lot of drug patents a while ago, but they haven't had anything new for a while. Rumors are that their building sits on some sort of tunnel system which links up with the subway system. That's everything I know about them, I swear!"

"Good boy. Now show me how to get into those tunnels. I don't ever want to see you again, got it Jenner? If I do, I will personally make it my mission to make sure your death is a slow and painful one, got it?"

She gave him a shove towards the door, finally letting go of his throat, but keeping the pistol pointed towards him. Hesitantly and carefully Jenner reached beyond the desk and pulled out a disk.

"Sure, no problem, I'll just grab my bags and be going then shall I? Here's the map, so we're even."

"I don't think so, Jenner."

"What? You can't do that!"

Emily lifted her pistol slightly, just daring him to take one step forward, anything so that she could remove a bit of flotsam from the gene pool.

"Ahm, on second thought, I'll just be going then shall I?"

"Get out of my sight, Jenner."

"Major, can you hear me?"

"Julie, you ok?"

The redhead sighed and leaned back against the rough, stone wall behind her. Glaring at the force field that covered the entrance to the small cell she'd been put into, she shook her head.

"I guess. What about you guys?"

"I'm alright, I don't know where the others are. What did Whittecker want with you?"

Julie hesitated at that and closed her eyes. Doing her best not to think about the large armored spider like shaped guards who had "escorted" her to the cell on General Whittecker's orders.

"He told me some things about my parents."

"What sort of things?"

Biting her lower lip, the Guardian shot a look out at the hallway outside. The view was slightly distorted by the shimmering force field, but she could still make out most of the roughly carved hallway.

"Major Sims, what do you know about my parents?"

"Just what I read in your file, Julie."

"It's hard to remember what they look like. I just remember waiting for them to come pick me up and never showing. I should remember what they looked like better shouldn't I, Major?"

"Julie, you were only in fifth grade when they died. What did Whittecker tell you about them?"

Julie ignored the question, slipping the steak knife from her sleeve and wondering if there was a way she could use it to get out of the cell. It kept her from focusing on what the General had said.

"How did Majestic find me?"

There was a pause as the Major either tried to remember, or was trying to figure out why she asked.

"We got a tip that this young girl was doing odd things to any machinery near her when she had what they thought were Epileptic fits."

"He said they'd made me."

"What? What do you mean, made you?"

"General Whittecker, he said that they'd made me. He's Bak'ra, Major. They've been here for a long time."

Julie's voice wavered as she forced herself to continue.

"He must have been lying, right Major? That can't be. I'm human."

The pause that followed was all the answer she needed. The knife slipped from her fingers as sobs finally forced their way out.

"Oh God, what a smell."

Privately the First Guardian agreed with Clarice, out loud she said nothing as they continued down the sewer tunnel. A rat the size of her foot scurried past them, heading deeper into the tunnel system. The halogen flashlight at least was powerful enough to chase most of the shadows from the area ahead of them. All four of them had their dart pistols out and were keeping a close eye on their surroundings.

"Make certain you know what you're shooting at down here. There's bound to be a few workers down here somewhere."

Double-checking the map they'd downloaded from Jenner's disk, Emily motioned them forward towards a left hand turn. Thankfully the tunnel only had a small stream of water flowing down its center. Still the First Guardian did her best to ignore the bits of junk and questionable things which floated down that flow of water.

"There should be an access door about twenty meters ahead of us."

Tom was on point, sweeping the area ahead of them. They all looked rather stupid moving down the tunnel dressed as tourists, but all of them were deadly serious.

"There it is, First Guardian."

Clarice and Liam were bringing up the rear, leaving the First Guardian free to check the map and deal with any traps they might run into. Carefully Emily moved up past her Honor Guard and took a careful look at the door. It looked at first glance to be a simple iron access hatch, like hundreds of others spread underneath the city of New York. On second glance it turned out to be no such thing.

Frowning Emily kneeled next to the door and took out a small pack. The transponder was still transmitting, she noted thankfully. At least Angwar would know her exact position, until they got too deep underground that was.

"Tom, keep an eye down the tunnel. I don't think we've been spotted yet, but that could change."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Carefully the First Guardian withdrew a small laser scalpel from the pack she'd brought with her, and set to work. It took about five minutes of patient cutting to get access to the door's computer system. What had looked like iron turned out to be, if not battle steel, then considerably more tough than most human steel.

"Clarice, put this somewhere safe. Careful, it's still armed."

Gently the raven-haired woman handed up the plasma charge, which had been attached to the inside of the access panel.

The Marine was very gentle holding it and setting it aside.

"Alright, now to get to the real work."

Closing her eyes, Emily lightly touched her fingertips to the exposed circuitry. With the practiced ease of someone who had been doing it for ages, she created the bond. Gifted, as they were called, were those few people who had the capability to do what Emily was about to attempt.

Swiftly she felt her way along the circuitry, sending out tendrils of her consciousness. She frowned slowly as she continued her trace. The circuit was an isolated one, and she couldn't manage to access anything other than the door, and shut down the local observation systems. Which was fine with her, at the moment all she wanted was to get through the doorway. The alarms were sophisticated, but she was a Guardian. It took her only a few moments to locate them and neutralize them, then override the door and open it. The cameras up and down the hallway beyond she set on a loop.

Withdrawing from the circuits back into her body was as disorienting as it always was when not dealing with her ship self.

The door slid open silently, as Emily forced her body to answer and stand up. The bright light shining from inside the doorway caused them all to wince slightly.

So far so good.

"Let's go."

The white hallway before them looked like nothing so much as a hospital corridor. It even smelled like one.

Thank the Maker we're out of that stench from the sewer.

Quietly she waved Tom forward, not about to get her Marines annoyed with her at the moment.

"Let's get to a computer panel I can use to find where they are."

The long corridor was almost completely quiet, only the small hum of air conditioning could be heard. The sound of their footsteps echoed down the hallway, despite their attempts to move quietly. Every dozen feet or so, a room would open off either side of the hallway. Each of those rooms were dark, and glances inside showed what looked like hospital beds, and occasionally more arcane equipment. The bright fluorescent lights overhead lit the stark corridor quite well.

"Ma'am, what did they use this place for?"

The First Guardian shook her head, having a few ideas, but none of them were nice.

"I don't know, Clarice. I didn't even know that this place existed. Pretty obvious that Intelligence messed up somewhere along the line. Of course we managed to miss the fact that there were Bak'ra on Earth also."

She'd already had a few "words" with the newly formed Intelligence service, making it clear what she thought about their predecessor's abilities. The corridor eventually ended in a T intersection.

"There, that looks like an active computer station."

Tom scouted ahead of them, waving the rest forward after checking both ways to make certain they were clear.

"It looks clear, First Guardian."

Holstering the pistol, the First Guardian reached the active panel and smiled.

Hold on, Julie, I'm going to find you, and then I'm going to kill anyone who hurt you.

"Shit!"

Tossing the knife aside, Julie sucked on her injured thumb, glaring at the stubborn force field that barred her way. She'd been trying to see if she could pry under what had looked like a poorly installed floor plate. Which had turned out to not be quite so poorly installed.

"You ok, Julie?"

"Sure, Major, just scratched my thumb. This stupid thing isn't going anywhere."

"Can't you, I don't know, bond with it or something?"

Julie resisted the urge to try and look towards Major Sims. He was in another cell and she'd have to lay her cheek against the force field to see him. Which would be a rather unpleasant few seconds.

"Bond with it? What do you think I am, some sort of leech? Does this thing look like it's a computer system to you, Major?"

What could have been a muttered apology floated back to her, and Julie turned back to glaring at the shimmering field.

"There has to be a way to get pass these things."

"You ever ask the First Guardian about force fields, Julie?"

"Yeah, I did back when I was in training."

"What did she say?"

"Don't get caught between them."

There was a pregnant pause and the Major sighed.

"Well that doesn't help us too much."

"Really, Major, I hadn't noticed."

"Nice to see you still have a retort for everything, Julie. Now that I'm not your commanding officer I can tell you this. You were always a smart ass."

"Hey, Major?"

"Yeah?"

"Love you too."

The startled silence that followed that brought a smile to the young American's face.

Score: Julie one, Major zero.

"You got any ideas as to how to get us out of here yet?"

Well, maybe not.

"You're killing me here, Major, I really don't have a clue."

"Come on, you're a Guardian, don't you have any tricks left?"

"Sure, I'll just ask the force field to go away politely."

"Julie..."

Ignoring the annoyed tone in the Major's voice, Julie turned towards the field once more and continued her sarcastic charade. It felt surprisingly good to vent.

"Mr. Force Field, won't you please shut down for me?"

She batted her eyes at the field and snorted.

"Well darn, Major, guess that Mr. Force Field wasn't..."

With a slight hiss and a shimmer, the field simply faded from view. Along with it faded every other field in the hallway. Julie stared in shock at the now open doorway.

"...listening."

The Major cautiously stepped out of a cell further down the corridor and into her view.

"Hot damn, girl, I don't know what you did, but good work. Let's get out of here, Julie."

"I didn't do anything, trust me."

Still she had no problems at all with that suggestion. Grabbing her uniform jacket, she followed the Major down the corridor back the way they had come. There had to be an exit somewhere down there that they could use.

There we go, got it.

With a mental flip she deactivated the rest of the security systems in the base and shut down the power feed to the force fields on the holding cells. Marking their location, she started to pull out of the system. There was another computer system linked to this one, which she couldn't access easily. A large data store caught her eye though and she darted in to take a quick peek.

What she found caused even her physical body to arch an eyebrow in surprise.

Well, well, what do we have here? All of your little secrets in one place, General Whittecker? Too bad I don't have time to sort through these, but I can do something about that.

It really didn't take too much effort to activate what appeared to be several high bandwidth links to the internet. Which she supposed was left over from when they were making Betty. Even easier to send copies of those files out onto the internet, to every Imperial installation she could think of, tacking on a note asking for backup, and the location of where she was currently.

Satisfied that she'd get to the files later, she pulled out of the network just in time to see Tom aim his dart pistol past her head and squeeze the trigger. The pistol was standard Imperial issue, and used electromagnets inside of it to accelerate the dart down the barrel. Unlike the rifles, a pistol's dart didn't make it supersonic, but it still went faster than you could track with the naked eye. The Marines were using explosive rounds, designed to penetrate armor and then detonate.

All of which did nothing to the thing racing down the hallway toward them. The dart's explosion didn't leave so much as a scratch on its battle steel covered body. It was a familiar shape, although she hadn't seen one for nearly sixty years now.

"Bak'ra Battle Drone, get back!"

Desperately the four of them fell back down the hallway, firing as they did. The small hail of darts, which would have destroyed a tank with little trouble, did nothing but enrage the thing racing towards them. It reminded Emily of nothing so much as a terrene spider, coated reflective armor, with weapon pods mounted on its back.

When the tip of what looked like a disruptor cannon glowed to life, Emily knew their time was almost up. The door off the side of the hallway seemed like divine intervention.

"Here! Move!"

Tom was a split second behind the others as they lunged through the doorway. He spent a moment too long firing at the creature bearing down on them, a heartbeat of indecision.

In that heartbeat the disruptor cannon fired, and Tom Nickels disintegrated before Emily's eyes. The cannon was not a pretty weapon, and she'd often thought that it was used for fear as much as anything else. The sight of the flesh melting off of his body even while Tom screamed and tried to move toward them would forever remain with her though.

He'd live until the cannon's discharge ate into his chest, or skull. She'd been told that the victim would even survive their eyes melting from their sockets. First Guardian Windstar did what she could to help a Marine who had been a member of her Honor Guard for nearly two years now.

She aimed her dart pistol at his head and fired.

"What was that?"

Julie shrugged in answer, crouching down by the side of the blast door that they had run into. At the moment she was doing her best to try and rip open the side to get at the control wiring inside, and doing a pretty bad job of it. The fact that she was only using the steak knife was one reason for that. The other was that she really didn't know what she was doing. She had her hands full, and she really didn't want to lose a finger trying to listen to what the Major had heard.

The small beep as she managed to rip the cover off the access hatch made her freeze though.

"Umm, Major?"

The Major currently had his bald, black head pressed up against the blast door trying to see if he could hear something on the other side of it.

"I think I have a problem."

"What sort of problem?"

"The bomb sort."

That got his attention and he squatted down to see what Julie had been doing. Taking a look at what looked like a plasma charge linked to the inside of the access hatch, he nodded.

"Yeah that looks like a bomb sort of problem to me."

Julie wondered if it would be justified for a Guardian to die taking out a sometimes-annoying Major with her.

Emily would be pissed though, so maybe not.

"Major..."

"Don't worry, it's just armed I think, don't move though."

Carefully he took the steak knife from her and managed to squirm around until he had a clear line of sight with the charge.

"Friend of mine in Internal Affairs showed me how to disarm these. Said that the Bak'ra loved putting them everywhere, in case someone tried to access something they shouldn't. Must be fun doing maintenance on their ships."

Julie did her best to stay still and not give in to her urge to smack the Major and tell him to hurry up. Predictably she had an annoying itch on her nose, and holding her position was starting to suck.

"Got it, I think."

"You think?"

"We'll find out as soon as you move."

"You know, sometimes I swear you and Mary would get along just fine."

Then again the young computer hacker would probably corrupt the Major even further, so Julie decided it would be best they not spend time together. Moving her hands she let out a breath when nothing happened and smiled.

"Guess you earn your pay today, Major."

"Can you open this blast door now?"

"Sure I think, just give me a few moments."

Wiping the sweat off her fingers, and scratching her nose, Julie reached back inside of the panel and laid her fingertips against the exposed circuits. It was difficult to sink into the bond with a foreign system, not like the constant bond with her ship self. Unlike Southern Cross though, the circuits she was bonding with were quite simple and it only took her a few seconds to figure them out. It was an isolated system, operating the blast door only and a few security devices near it. Thankfully those seemed to be deactivated already. A few mental commands to rewrite the command codes for the door, and it slid open.

A yell of warning jerked her head up, and brought her out of the bond. Green eyes widened as a familiar First Guardian careened down the hallway and through the now open blast doorway. Two Marines were hot on her heels, and further down the corridor, just turning a corner, Julie could make out a large form. It looked a lot like one of the things that the General had escort her to her cell earlier.

"Close the door!"

Emily's yell snapped her out of it, and Julie bent back down, touching the circuitry once more. It was easier this time, as she knew what to do, and the blast door slid shut just as something on the back of the creature glowed brightly.

Emily grabbed a hold of her arm and pulled her upright, then started to drag her down the hallway back the way she'd come.

"Time to go, sweetheart."

When the corridor that they had fled into ended in a pair of blast doors, Emily had almost been certain that they were out of luck. When those blast doors slid open as they approached, she'd been certain something nasty was waiting for them on the other side. The fact that it was Julie and Major Sims was a very nice surprise, one of the few of the day.

"Time to go, sweetheart."

She yelled as she half dragged Julie a few paces before the redhead got her feet under her and managed to keep up with the sprint. Something very large slammed into the blast doors behind them, causing them to bulge outward. Emily had no doubts about how long it would take the Battle Drone to force its way through those doors.

The hallway they were sprinting down had changed from steel construction to raw bedrock.

"Our cells are down here, Emie."

Emily nodded, not wasting breath on an answer. She knew that from when she had entered the base's computer system. What she was searching for was the lift shaft that she had seen detailed in the base plans earlier.

They sprinted down the hall, past the now empty holding cells, until Emily spotted what she was looking for. The fluorescent lights mounted above provided enough illumination for her to see the reflection of highly worked metal ahead of them.

"There's a lift shaft. Julie and I are going to override it and get the lift down here. Hold off the Battle Drone until we can."

There was little chance of them doing much in the way of damage with just dart pistols, but they might be able to slow it down a bit if they got in a lucky shot or two. Tugging Julie over to an access port, Emily placed both of their hands on top of it.

"Here, help me, I couldn't access this from the main computer system"

It was a rare thing when two Guardians sent their consciousness into the same system at the same time. It was as close to being telepathically connected as Emily hoped she would ever get.

Emie, what is this?

I don't know, Julie; it's not like the other system. This one uses Bak'ra technology; notice how the computer architecture's different?

No, I know that, I meant what is this?

A whiff of the annoyance that Julie was feeling drifted over the First Guardian. Sending a feeling of affection in return, she diverted a part of herself from getting control over the lift, to see what the smaller woman had found. Both of them jerked back in surprise as they realized what it was at the same time.

Dear God Emily, it's alive!

The revulsion in the redhead's voice was clear. Emily did her best to sooth her friend, while keeping an eye on the new discovery.

It's a ship brain, Julie. The Bak'ra use them to open Warp Gates, there are no gifted Bak'ra.

Is it dead?

No, probably just in a sort of hibernation until they need it. Come on, I think I found the lift command codes. Help me reroute them.

The two of them worked quickly, each helping the other. The security protocols in the Bak'ra computer system were much more advanced than the ones in the rest of the base. It took time for them to get around them without alerting anyone to what they were doing, time they were rapidly running out of.

Emie, the Battle Drone's almost through the blast doors.

I know, Julie, I know. Here, we're almost done, we'll just have to hope the others slow it down a little bit.

They finished work just as the drone forced its way through the last of the foot thick blast doors. The two surviving Marines opened fire, along with the Major, doing their best to slow the thing down. It kept right on coming though, ignoring what looked like small glancing explosions on its metal frame.

Emily was the first one to pull out of the system completely, and she grabbed a hold of Julie as the human wobbled a bit after following her out.

"Lift's on the way, get ready to fall back."

Julie was muttering, come on, come on, under her breath as the drone raced closer. The tip of its disruptor cannons began to glow, and still the lift hadn't arrived yet.

"Crap."

Emily muttered, wishing she could take her dart pistol back from the Major and feel useful.

Liam had been in her Honor Guard for longer than even Tom had been. He'd been a silent companion with Emily for nearly five years now. The tall, lanky man had come, originally, from Texas. He never said much, and he had a definite tendency to meld into the background. None of them noticed when he shifted over next to the wall. They all noticed when he started a wild sprint down the hallway though.

To her dying day, Emily was certain he was singing a tune written by Kid Rock.

"I wanna be a cowboy, baby!"

His wild charge startled all of them into ceasing fire, which was a good thing since they probably would have hit him. The drone seemed slightly surprised as well; the brain implanted in it hesitated. There was no reason for the humanoid to charge it, yet it had.

With a wild leap that would have done warriors of old proud, Liam lunged forward, past the twin blasts of disruptor fire from the back of the drone. The doors behind them slid open just as the drone reared backwards and impaled Liam on one of its legs.

The doors slid shut just as the drone tossed the limp body aside. Emily ground her teeth in mute fury as another one of her people died.

Julie buried her face in the front of Emie's shirt trying to shut out the image she'd just seen. The bright splash of blood across the hallway, the crunch as the Marine's backbone broke.

"Emily, we've got to get out of here."

"I know, Jules, I know. Don't worry, we'll get out of here."

The lift slid to a stop and reluctantly Julie let go of her taller companion before the doors opened. Clarice and the Major were the only ones with dart pistols left, and they moved forward, aiming at what might appear beyond those doors.

It was slightly surprising when the doors slid open to show the gaunt figure of General Whittecker waiting for them, but not that much. The three drones waiting with him were a bit of a surprise though.

"First Guardian, how nice of you to show up. Please do come out and join us."

Julie slipped her hand into the First Guardian's and was relieved when she felt a squeeze in return. Two of the drones moved forward to flank them as the entire group stepped out of the lift, having no other choice.

"General Whittecker, nice to finally meet you."

"Lirik was an idiot, First Guardian. He should have killed you while he had the chance."

Julie felt her taller friend tense at mention of the insane Guardian.

"You'll never get out of here alive, Whittecker. They know where you are now."

He laughed, more of a dry wracking cough, at that.

"Oh please, save your threats, Windstar. The U.S. will never stand for any attacks in its borders, not now. Pity about the death of President Blake wasn't it?"

It took Julie a moment to understand why Emily was nudging her toward the nearest drone. When she did, it took all of her concentration to avoid giving away her understanding. She prayed she understood what the First Guardian wanted her to do.

The First Guardian stepped forward, ignoring Clarice's attempt to protect her.

"So you kill me, and then what, Whittecker? You know that the Imperial Forces won't care about U.S. jurisdiction if that happens. They'll tear this city apart to find you, Whittecker. Then they'll have even more fun when they go through the files from your computer system that I sent them."

That, unlike nearly everything else, got a reaction from the General. He actually growled, something that Emily hadn't been certain he could manage.

"You bitch. I'm still going to have the pleasure of taking you out though."

He lifted an odd looking pistol of some sort, just as Julie's fingers reached out behind the Major and brushed against the side of one of the drones.

Alien thoughts swamped her as she forced a bond with the thing. The thoughts were cold and crystal sharp with logic. What she tried to do now she had never tried before. The small woman struck quickly, hoping that speed would help her. She drove herself deep into the thing's being, rending everything about her. With a burst of strength she didn't know she possessed, she forced the thing at bay and took over its mechanical body. The mind was still there, raging at her back, but for now she had it under her control.

"See you in hell, Lady Windstar."

Julie saw through the, well she supposed you could call them eyes, of the drone. It was an oddly abstract way to watch what was happening around her. Not as disorienting as it would have been to one who had not been bonded with a ship self, and seen through sensors nothing like eyes.

The glow as the drone's disruptors powered up was reflected in General Whittecker's eyes. Emily snarled and whipped up the dart pistol that even Julie had not seen her take from Major Sims. Emily fired at the same time that Julie used the drone's weapons on the other two. Where the dart pistols could do virtually no damage to a Bak'ra Battle Drone, the disruptors could. The battle steel armor seemed to waver and melt as it disintegrated; the drones died a slow death.

General Whittecker beat them to that death though. In that one moment when he jerked in surprise toward the drone that had powered up its disruptors, Emily fired. The explosive dart caught him just below the nape of the neck, and lifted what was left of his body up and flung it backwards.

"Not today, General."

It's amazing how much can change in twenty-four hours.

Twenty-four hours ago, Julie had been secure in her place in the scheme of things. She was a Guardian and a human. That had been enough for her, and she'd gladly committed herself to her new position as a Guardian. Even more than that, she'd enjoyed the growing relationship that she shared with the First Guardian. Reveled in it, and dearly wanted to take it to the next level.

All of which had seemed to come to an end underneath New York City.

Julie sat by the view port on the drop ship, which was taking her back up to her ship self. On board Southern Cross she'd be escorted to the ships infirmary and comprehensive tests would be run to determine if what Whittecker had said was true. She feared what they would find. She remembered little of their trip from Manhattan back to Governor's Island.

The look in the First Guardian's eyes when she'd escorted her to the drop ship had stayed with her though. There had been anger and fear, but overriding it all, she'd seen confusion in those blue eyes.

Throughout the ride up to Southern Cross, Julie remembered how Emily had moved as if to touch her shoulder, and then let her hand drop. She could feel the tall woman withdraw from her, and seal her off.

Closing her eyes in pain, Julie leaned her head back against the headrest.

Dear God, please don't let this take her away from me.

Chapter Seven

"Are you certain?"

"I'm sorry, First Guardian, but there's no doubt. Once we knew what markers to search for, the results are irrefutable."

Emily closed her eyes and fought back the urge to scream. She took in a deep breath then nodded.

"Thank you, Dr. Weaver. Keep an eye on Julie."

"Of course, First Guardian. She asked to speak with you when you commed me for the results."

"Tell her I'll talk with her later. North Star's Chief Medical Officer will be coordinating the search for these markers in our database, please make certain to contact him. I want a list of anyone who turns up with them."

"Not a problem. Will we be checking the lists from the Re-gen centers as well?"

"Yes, Doctor, we will. I want any other of the General's creations tracked down before they can cause any problems."

The middle-aged doctor nodded slowly, although she was frowning. The former civilian doctor finally gave in to her urge to speak out, and Emily sighed as she started to give the First Guardian a piece of her mind.

"First Guardian, I don't think that these creations as you call them, would be a threat unless they had been trained to be. I won't pretend that I understand completely what the Bak'ra did to the genetics of these people, but they're brain structure isn't affected much. It's beyond anything we could do of course, the Bak'ra always were ahead of us in the biological sciences. The markers should be relatively easy to screen for now that we know what they are."

"Doctor, we can't afford to run that chance. I want them found, and then we will decide what to do with them on a case by case basis if need be."

Southern Cross' Chief Medical Officer nodded, but she looked fairly pissed off.

"As you wish, First Guardian. Are you certain you don't want to speak to Guardian McGrath? She really wanted to talk to you."

The edge of anger was palpable, even through the com channel.

"Thank you, Doctor, but I'll contact her when I have time."

Emily cut the channel before Southern Cross' doctor could reply. Swallowing against the urge to find a corner and vomit, the First Guardian swiveled her chair to regard the view ports in her ready room. North Star was in a geo-synchronous orbit over Southern America. Southern Cross wasn't far away on a similar orbit, but the angle was wrong for her to see the other Guardian-Class ship from where she sat. Of course she was keeping a close eye on it through her ship self's sensors. She forced herself to admit that she didn't know if she could trust Julie anymore.

"What do you want to do?"

That wasn't a question that Emily wanted to answer, and she shook her head once more.

"Hell if I know, Angwar."

Her Provost had been present throughout the conversation with Southern Cross' doctor, and he was looking at her with something entirely too much like worry.

"You can't keep ignoring her, Emie, it's been four days now."

"I'm not ignoring her, Angwar, I've just been busy trying to figure out what to do with her."

Judging by the look on her Provost's face, he believed that answer as much as she did.

"The other Guardians are waiting for you to decide what to do with her you know."

Which, Emily sighed, was a not so subtle way of pointing out that she couldn't keep avoiding the problem. As much as she would dearly love to, she couldn't hand this one over to someone else. As First Guardian, the call on this one was firmly in her court.

"I told Dr. Manito to be ready to use Cynaomarist."

Blue eyes which were dark with turmoil, flicked up to look at her Provost's reflection. The look of shock on his face was telling.

"I take it you don't agree with that course, Angwar?"

Her voice was perfectly controlled, and only someone who had known her as long as Angwar had, would have detected the slight edge to it. The Provost licked his lips and decided it would be a good idea to proceed carefully on this one.

"Emie, she's been working with humans her entire life, she didn't know she was made by the Bak'ra. Are you certain you want to remove her completely from control of her ship self just because of that?"

The First Guardian's voice was ice as she swiveled her chair once more to face him.

"She's one of them, Angwar. One of those things, one of the one's who destroyed our planet, and killed our race. How can you sit there and tell me that I shouldn't remove her from control? By all rights I should shove her out an airlock!"

Swallowing, Emily leaned back, forcing her hands to stop trembling and reeling herself in. She'd been shouting by the end, and it took her a few seconds to get herself under control.

"Emie, look at me. I'm your Provost, and I'm also your friend. Don't do this to her, or yourself. She can't help where she came from, but that doesn't change what she is."

"What is she, Angwar? Do you know? Do you really know what she is? Can we risk her turning on us when the Bak'ra show up? Are you willing to risk this world on that?"

Angwar stood slowly, a flicker of what she thought was sadness crossing his face. It was gone before Emie could figure out what it was though.

"She's still, Julie. That hasn't changed, no matter what has happened. She's a Guardian, Emily, she took the oaths, and passed every requirement she had to. If you remove her from duty, what message is that going to send?"

"It will send the message that I hate the Bak'ra, which I do, so I don't see any problem with that."

Angwar straightened to attention, saluted and stalked out of her ready room.

"If you say so, First Guardian."

The doors slid closed behind him before she could get in the final word. This time she let the anger sweep up over her, and flung the pads from the top of her desk. Several bounced off the other bulkhead with a satisfying crack. A wordless scream of rage at the fates that would let her fall in love with someone who she wanted to hate with all her heart.

Pounding her fist against the bulkhead didn't do much other than give her bloody knuckles. Lady Windstar, First Guardian, second in line for the Imperial throne, slid down the bulkhead of her ready room and raged against it all. The deaths of those she had been supposed to protect, her world, her people, and now her love.

Julie stared at the main holo tank and sighed. Four days of being ignored by Emily hadn't helped her mood at all. The other reason for her depression she simply ignored all together.

"Guardian?"

I guess I should be happy I'm still a Guardian.

"Yes, Webster?"

"Message from Guardian Command."

"I'll take it at my console."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Of course the fact that Emie's got her Honor Guard keeping an eye on me might have something to do with that. Who wants to bet that they have Cynaomaris on them?

Leaning back in her crash couch she let her bond with her ship self deepen. It would have probably been quicker to just call up the message on a screen, but she wanted to feel a bit of pride in something at least.

It wasn't that large a message, and it wasn't even specifically addressed to her. Sorting through the incoming com traffic she located the one flagged for her attention and quickly removed the encryption code.

The coming online date for the global shield is pushed back another two weeks? Emie must be really happy about that, she's even called for a Guardian assembly in two hours.

She'd been hoping for something a bit more personal, or something that even had anything to do with her at all. No new orders at all, or even a note from Emily. At least she would sort of be able to see Emily at the assembly. With a mental sigh she filed away the memo in her ship self's computer files. Sinking deeper into the bond she spread her consciousness through her ship self's computers. Her sensors became her eyes, and she reveled in the sights. The Earth lay suspended below her, and she couldn't imagine a more beautiful sight.

Emily, smiling after we kissed, her eyes the most perfect blue.

Well, perhaps she could imagine a more beautiful sight.

Even further into the bond she sank, feeling less and less of her organic body. The Type-Fourteen Guardian-class ship that was her ship self was the newest thing in Imperial engineering. Her thoughts brushed across the shield generators, which would protect her during battle, and she gazed in wonder at the massive fusion generators that were the heart of her ship self. The thirty

missile tubes, and eighteen plasma launchers, mounted on each of her broad sides were a grim reminder of what her ship self had been built for. The bow of her ship self though, that was where she paid the most attention.

The hammerhead design of her ship self was what set the new generation of Guardian-Class ships apart from the old cigar-shaped ones. The large gravitic lance mounted in that hammerhead was the core of the ships new weapon systems.

Her engineering crew was still working on a few of the bugs, and she noted that they had pulled number 14 missile tube entirely. If she really had wanted to, she could have taken an even closer look at what they were doing, but she trusted them. Lieutenant Sanders, her head Engineer, was as far as Julie was concerned, a miracle worker. The woman was built like a Scandinavian goddess, but she knew what she was doing.

Once again she returned to her sensors, and scanned the area surrounding her ship self. North Star hung like a jewel against the darkness of night, a scant four hundred kilometers away. The cigar-shaped ship was a beehive of activity. Julie knew that if she looked at herself she'd see the same flurry of shuttles going to and from the surface bases, which dotted the Earth. It just seemed more impressive watching them surround the long length of North Star.

The sight brought her a fierce stab of pain and fear. Pain that she could be so close to Emily, and yet so far away. The fear was for what would happen to the fragile Earth that lay suspended below her. Before the loneliness could drag her under, Julie retreated into her flesh and blood body.

"I'll be in my ready room, Mr. Webster. You have the con."

The young man in charge of the com station blinked in surprise and then rose hastily as he eagerly answered.

"Yes, Ma'am!"

He was one of those people who would have had glasses before the Re-gen treatments, and Julie had to smile at his exuberance. It had been a while since she'd felt that enthusiastic about something.

Since New York you mean.

Julie had no trouble at all ignoring the little voice in her head as she made her way to her sanctuary. Only it wasn't hers alone anymore. Clarice silently followed her through the doors from the Command Deck. A silent reminder that Emily didn't think she could trust her. It was a reminder that hurt the most.

"Help yourself to something to drink, Clarice."

"I'm on duty, Ma'am," came the apologetic response, one that Julie had been anticipating. With a weary shrug, she sat behind her desk and eyed the com unit perched on its black surface. She had a little less than two hours before the Guardian conference was to be called. For the last four days she'd filled her time running combat drills with her crew and learning as much about her ship self's capabilities as she could. Now she just felt drained and alone.

"At least take a seat, Clarice, or are you afraid I'll try to lock the doors and take over control of Southern Cross from here?"

The Marine looked slightly sheepish as she lowered her slight frame into one of the chairs along the back wall. The Marine was definitely not as small as Julie, but she wasn't anywhere near the height of the First Guardian. Still she managed to look quite impressive in the combat gear she carried around all the time.

"I don't think you'd try that, Ma'am."

"Well, that makes one person at least. Stop calling me Ma'am. You're making me feel old, Clarice."

"Yes Ma... I mean, Guardian."

Julie smiled a bit at that; it was better than Ma'am at least. Since there wasn't much else to occupy her at the moment, Julie turned her full attention to her silent shadow for the last four days. Clarice had been the only one of Emily's Honor Guard that had accompanied her to New York, to live through the experience. She didn't look much the worse for the wear.

"You're Tiri by descent, aren't you, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Ma... Guardian."

"Look, how about you just call me Julie ok? The Guardian thing just sounds weird when you say it all the time."

Gray eyes seemed to hold a hint of amusement in them as the Marine nodded in agreement.

"Yes, Julie."

Feeling a bit more at ease than she had all day long, Julie smiled back and settled into her chair. If she couldn't enjoy herself with Emie, then damn it; she'd at least make a new friend.

"How long did you serve as the First Guardian's Honor Guard?"

"Since before the war. I was stationed as a Marine on North Star when she was newly bonded. From there I was promoted to Honor Guard when the war started."

A shadow passed in those gray eyes and Julie nodded in understanding. She'd seen that look on every Tiri she'd talk to about their war against the Bak'ra. They all carried survivors' guilt, in one form or another. *Having witnessed the destruction of your entire Empire does that to you, I guess.*

"Wow, you've been an Honor Guard for over sixty years?"

Holding the same job for that long was something most human's pre-Tiri wouldn't have understood. For the Tiri, who thanks to their Regeneration treatments, could live to a comfortable three hundred, it was just a fraction of their lives. Humans would start to think like that eventually, but it would take time. For now most of them hadn't grasped the fact that with all the Re-gen Centers that the Empire had opened, they could live to nearly three hundred and fifty if they were lucky.

"I've always been satisfied with my job. It's a great honor to be chosen to protect the First Guardian."

Clarice correctly interpreted Julie's puzzled glance towards her rank symbols.

"If I had been promoted past what is now called a Lieutenant, I'd have had to take on other duties."

"Do you mind being assigned to me then?"

If the Marine wanted to go back to her duties with the First Guardian, Julie would take it to Emily herself if need be. She wasn't going to be stuck with a babysitter who didn't even want to be there. The answer though, surprised her. Shaking her head, Clarice straightened slightly in her chair.

"No, Ma'am. I believe that protecting you," she stressed the protecting part, "serves the First Guardian just as much as if I were to be at her side."

Julie stared at her in confusion, scrunching up her nose in thought.

"What?"

"She cares for you, Julie, if she didn't you wouldn't still be a Guardian."

The redhead's green eyes darkened and she pushed her chair back from the desk. The fact that a Marine was telling her how the First Guardian felt was enough to make her feel uncomfortable enough, but on top of everything else, it just left her feeling angry.

"You can't know that, Clarice. If she cared for me she wouldn't have pretended I didn't exist for the last four days!"

Clenching her teeth, Julie willed herself to calm down. Yelling at the Marine wasn't going to solve anything, and might just undermine the tenuous bonds of friendship she'd thought had started to form.

"Ma'am, Julie, you were made by people that she, that we all, hate with our souls. It won't be easy for her to accept that."

Obviously feeling that she had pushed the conversation as far that way as she could, Clarice tacitly switched the topic.

"Can I ask you something?"

Frowning as she replayed the last little bit of their conversation, and wondering why she'd gone off so quickly, Julie nodded in mute agreement.

"Why don't you have a Provost? I understand that the other human Guardians who graduated with you have picked theirs."

Spinning the com console around on top of her desk with an idle flick of her wrist, the redhead shook her head. It wasn't quite as easy a question to answer as she'd been hoping for.

"I was going to, but I have a problem trusting people like that. Emily, well, you know how she is. She inspires people to trust her, and to give her their best. I just double checked on what my chief engineer was doing, because I wanted to make certain she wasn't messing up, even though she's better at fixing things than I am."

Both of them shared a smile at that, having seen that particular brand of charisma at work.

"The First Guardian does do that, Julie, but people trust her because she trusts them to do their job."

A pale brow lifted at that.

"So you think I should trust my people to do their jobs and that will somehow make them trust me?"

"Do you know your command staff?"

Julie hesitated slightly at that, she'd started to get to know them. Then the entire chase after General Whittecker had started, and she'd lost more than just training time.

"Somewhat. I lost time when I went after Whittecker with the Major."

Clarice grinned wryly and leaned forward slightly, as much as she could with the full combat armor.

"Julie, you have the makings of a great Guardian. Despite what you might think, your people respect you already, and it's not far from respect to trust. Webster nearly worships the ground you walk on, and your Chief Engineer isn't that far behind. Your Tac Officer is just surly by countenance I think, and your Chief Medical Officer's just a bit stuck up. Even I don't know why your Head Sensor Tech acts the way he does, but your Helmsmen is good enough."

Somehow Julie rather thought that if they knew she was taking advice from a Marine, her instructors at Plattsburgh Air Force Base would have had an aneurysm. The Marine in question though was making a lot of sense.

"Like just now, when you put Webster in charge of the con, that made his day."

Julie chuckled at that and sat up a bit, easing out of the slumped dejected stance she'd been in.

"We're in geo synch orbit, what could go wrong? I'm in the ready room, even a tech could handle being officer of the watch right now."

"That's not the point, the point is that you trusted him to do it."

For the first time in four days Julie realized she was rather hungry. The low rumble of her stomach complaining sort of punctuated that fact.

"Clarice, I've got another hour or so before I have to link up for the Guardian session. I think I'm going to grab something to eat."

"That might be a good idea, Guardian."

"If you weren't my Honor Guard, I'd swear you were teasing me, Clarice."

"Never, Ma'am."

"That's what I thought."

Rising from her chair, Julie felt a bit of the depression ease off. Things didn't look quite so bad now.

Now if I can just get Emie to look at me like I'm not some kind of monster.

"Clarice? You're sure the First Guardian still cares about me?"

Her Marine simply chuckled and followed after the Guardian, rejoining the other three Honor Guard members who had waited outside of her ready room.

"As you all know, the last of the Orbital Forts came online approximately twenty four hours ago. A test start up of the planetary shield was to take place this afternoon at fourteen hundred hours. That test was delayed because we have a sticky situation to deal with, and for once, I actually have to pay attention to political matters."

Muted chuckles followed that comment, and the First Guardian smiled easily. For security reasons a gathering of every Guardian was not possible. It would have made far too tempting a target, even more so than the newly formed Imperial Senate. Thus the virtual meeting, it wasn't as secure as a face to face meeting, but anyone who could hack into a room with over a hundred gathered Guardians was very good indeed. Suicidal, but very good.

The virtual meeting was complete with a large amphitheater and, Emily thought dryly, awful seats.

"Political ramifications aside, we have a problem, people. As you all know, the Planetary Shield is our last line of defense in protecting the Earth from Bak'ra attacks. Unfortunately, once the shield is activated, everything in low Earth orbit is going to be incinerated."

Mary leaned forward in her seat with interest as the virtual holographic display behind the image of the First Guardian activated. The hundreds of active communication and spy satellites in what the Tiri considered low Earth orbit whipped around the slowly rotating Earth. It was a cool image and Mary wondered if there was anyway to get that large a holotank installed on Trinity.

God that would look so great in my ready room, just think of the games I could play on it.

"Hey, Julie, do they make any of them that big?"

The redhead glared in response and Mary just shrugged, slumping down a bit in her seat.

"Wow, someone got up on the wrong side of the deck."

"Shhh... Emie's talking."

"Yeah? So what? She's not listening to you is she?"

Despite what Mary totally considered a valid point, she sighed and returned her attention to the First Guardian. Like every other Guardian, she'd heard what happened in New York, and frankly, the young hacker was worried about her friend. Glancing at Julie out of the corner of her eye, she couldn't help but notice how closely she was listening to Emily. The First Guardian had Julie's complete attention.

Yeah, except Emily's looking anywhere but at Julie. Damn, no wonder Julie's in a funk.

The First Guardian was still talking and Mary focused back on the events at hand.

"Nearly every government on Earth have spy sats and communication sats at jeopardy here. Which means that if we go ahead with firing up the shield, which we must, they are all going to go insane. Birk, whom you all know as the head of the Imperial Engineering core, is trying to design a way to move those satellites but trying to attach a tractor beam onto them would crush them. I wanted to raise this point to see if any of you had any suggestions that we may have overlooked."

A wave of murmuring swept across the virtual reality conference room, as Guardians discussed ideas with those next to them. The First Guardian herself waited patiently, obviously giving people time to sort out their thoughts. Mary took the opportunity to look at her friend once more.

"Hey, Julie? You ok?"

The slight shrug she got in return wasn't exactly a reassuring answer.

"Yeah sure, just been having one of those weeks, ya know?"

"Hell yes, I know. Julie, no matter what, you'll always be my friend ok?"

A smile formed on Julie's face and Mary did a mental shout for joy at getting a reaction. The somber green eyes lit up and even though it wasn't a physical hug, it was darn close to it as Julie leaned over and wrapped her arms around Mary in a brief squeeze.

"Thanks, Mary, that means a lot."

"So you got any ideas about this stuff?"

Mary waved a hand towards the First Guardian below, knowing Julie's discomfort with public shows of affection. The smile dimmed, but at least Julie's green eyes didn't turn so somber again.

"The satellite problem? I don't know, the governments are just going to have to accept that we need that shield up and running. They're going to have to write them off and find other ways to route communications. I could care less about their spy satellites."

Mary, who had some fond memories about hacking into a few of those spy satellites, wasn't about to argue that point at the moment.

"Too bad we just can't use the Orbital Forts to route communications for them."

Mary had already looked into that, and the dedicated communication suites just wouldn't be able to handle the volume they were talking about as well as coordinating the defense of the planet.

"You know... that's a good point."

Looking at her friend in surprise, Mary blinked in shock as Julie stood up from her seat and called down to the front.

"First Guardian, I have a question."

The shocked blue eyes that looked up towards Julie, and the silence that spread through the hall, showed that Mary was not the only one to be surprised by the sudden outburst.

The flicker of emotion was quickly gone as the tall raven-haired woman down below nodded regally.

"Go ahead, Guardian McGrath."

Only being Julie's housemate throughout their training as Guardians allowed Mary to see the small flinch at that, and understand its cause.

"I was wondering, First Guardian" the slight edge on the title was not lost on the woman below, "what is happening with the sensor platforms the Tiri put in orbit when they first arrived?"

It took everyone a second to figure out what Julie was talking about. When the Tiri had first arrived on Earth, over sixty years ago, they had undertaken several large works. The sensor sphere out beyond the orbit of Mars was one, the construction of their underground bases on Earth was another. They had also put into high orbit around the Earth, dozens of stealth sensor platforms, for keeping an eye on the humans they were trying to save.

"The orbital sensor platforms?"

Even as she spoke, the platforms appeared on the holographic image behind her, circling the Earth at a higher altitude than the majority of satellites that were shown.

"I believe they are being tied into the orbital defense network to augment the orbital stations."

Mary grinned and wished she could manage to make a virtual piece of gum without anyone noticing. The First Guardian was speaking directly to Julie, and it looked like the two of them had forgotten anyone else existed. *They sure as hell aren't looking away from each other.*

"Couldn't they be used to reroute the communication duties that the satellites are doing at the moment? We could even tie in the governments to use the sensor suites if we really wanted to, with limited access of course."

A general chorus of agreements and questions as to how that could be done rose from the assembled audience. The First Guardian didn't look like she noticed as she kept her eyes locked with Julie's. Ever so slightly she nodded.

"Yes, I think it could be done. That would certainly get most of the pressure off of our diplomatic core. Thank you... Julie."

It took a noticeable effort for the First Guardian to say that. Mary bit her upper lip and watched the two of them stare at each other until Julie slowly sank back down into her seat. The First Guardian looked away, cleared her throat and brought up another point.

Mary leaned over and whispered to her friend.

"Way to go, Julie!"

Julie winked in return and smiled proudly.

"I've noticed they always think about building new things before they think about adapting old things to serve a new purpose. Must be a Tiri thing. Shhh, Emie's talking about the ground troops we're being assigned."

Mary rolled her eyes and sunk down into her seat again, muttering.

"You are sooooo gone."

Thankfully, Julie didn't hear a word. Absently wondering how she could find someone to feel that obsessed about, Mary paid attention to the First Guardian again. Listening with considerable more interest as the Emily went into describing the Bak'ra ship which was being taken apart piece by piece from its hiding place under New York city.

"Well, what do you think, will it work?"

The short, by Tiri standards, rotund man squinted as he studied the diagrams before him. Rubbing the arm that he had only recently had reattached, Birk nodded slowly.

"Yes, it could... Yes! I think it will."

Emily resisted the urge to tell the man to stop yelling, she was only five feet away from him. Birk, no matter what he did, he did it with enthusiasm. Something, which on her best days she found a bit odd, today she just found it annoying.

"Birk?"

"Yes, First Guardian?"

"If you spit on me again, I'm going to break your other arm."

"Ah, sorry, First Guardian."

Wiping off her arm, Emily resisted the urge to smack the smaller man. He just rubbed her completely the wrong way.

"How long would it take, Birk?"

"Oh, well, lets see here. Well, we could change the emitters on the platforms themselves. Anyone who wanted to use them will have to realign their satellite dishes, as well. Figure we could have the platforms changed over by the end of the week, and we'd be good to go after that."

The end of the week was five days away, and Emily needed that shield up and running as soon as possible.

"You have three days Birk, get your people moving. Have Lorin strip people from ship construction duties if you need to, but get it done. I'll tell Winston, and he'll have the diplomatic core start setting it up earth side."

Birk stared at her as if she'd gone insane.

"Three days? But, I mean, there are over forty platforms in orbit!"

"You better get moving then hadn't you, Birk?"

Taking the non-too subtle hint, the engineer gathered his data pads and left in a huff. He reminded her of nothing so much as a waddling duck dressed in a uniform.

Hopefully that's one problem out of the way. Now only three hundred others to deal with before I can get some rest.

For what felt like the hundredth time that day, Emily ignored her impulse to contact Southern Cross and find out how Julie was doing.

She's Bak'ra...

Sea green eyes...

They destroyed my world...

Red hair that seemed to shimmer under the sun...

The Bak'ra use Tiri as a source of food...

She's one of the brightest people I've ever met...

They are the enemy.

I love her.

The litany continued, on and on, over and over again cycling through her brain as she argued with herself. The result was the same as it had been for the previous four days, the First Guardian leaned back in her chair and tried to ignore her pounding headache. Her temper was short, she'd nearly ripped the head off her com officer this morning, and it had been a struggle to resist pummeling Birk.

I need a distraction.

Straightening, she reached for the first data pad she could get her hands on and started reading the report.

Perfect, a report on President Fairchild.

General Whittecker's files had provided no end of embarrassments for the President of the U.S. Once Winston had leaked selected parts of those files to the world press, something that reminded Emily of a feeding frenzy took place.

One thing you can say for Whittecker, he kept a lot of records.

Records which specified the private arrangements which had been agreed upon by a certain Senator Fairchild before he accepted the offer by then Presidential candidate Blake to run as his Vice-Presidential candidate. They also traced the large amount of money, which had gotten Fairchild his seat as a Senator. Emily could just imagine how tempting it would have been to be offered the position of Vice-President on a silver platter. Even more, how it would have been to have a chance to be President. She knew Fairchild's kind; they lived for power, and how much more power could you get than the President of the U.S.?

Other than being a Guardian of course.

Emily smiled wanly at her own little joke and scanned through the rest of the report to the attached findings at the bottom. Whatever the results of the upcoming impeachment hearings, President Fairchild was a lame duck. He couldn't authorize a stamp without being hounded by the media now. There was no way he was going to survive the upcoming Presidential elections.

The strained relations between the Empire and the U.S. Government had eased considerably nearly overnight. The no-fly orders had been dropped like a, *what is it they call it, ah yes*, a hot potato. Things were getting back on track, but for once the U.S. was behind the rest of the world. Even the third world countries had a month long head start on the U.S. now.

The intelligence report on the two candidates was interesting, as was the in depth background searches that had been done on both. She read those with a bit more attention, still she found herself thinking often of a certain short redhead. The two main political parties, it seemed, had gotten sideswiped by the Imperial Senate elections, which had already been held. Neither had done a good job of getting candidates ready for those uniform elections.

Emily grimly smiled as she took another look at a different report. A surprisingly small majority of the Senators from North America were Democratic or Republican. *Good, guess it's not only a two party system anymore. They better wake up to that fact real fast though.*

The buzz from her com panel interrupted her thoughts. Flicking the pad back onto the desk top with the others, she pushed the accept button and raised a questioning eyebrow as her uncomfortable com officer looked back at her.

"Yes, Mr. Evans?"

"Uh, Ma'am, I have a com for you."

Blue eyes narrowed by a fraction of an inch as she took in the nervous behavior. Some of it was because she'd chewed him out earlier, but there was more to it than just that.

"From whom?"

"It's a com from Southern Cross' Guardian, Ma'am. Guardian McGrath would like to speak with you."

It would be so easy to accept that com, to speak with Julie. She'd apologize for ignoring the younger woman for the last few days, and for ever doubting her. It would be so easy, yet so very difficult; too difficult for the First Guardian, for Emie, to even attempt. The dark place in her soul where her hate resided wouldn't let her.

"Tell her..."

The First Guardian stared at the view port behind her, taking in the silent beauty of the stars. Swallowing she continued, damning herself for taking the coward's way.

"Tell her that I'm busy."

Chapter Eight

"Busy?"

"Ah, I mean, yes Guardian, the First Guardian is busy."

"Fine."

Snarling, she disconnected and stood, pacing behind her desk. She'd gone around having Webster make the com call for her, and had simply used her bond with her ship self to initiate the call. It wasn't as if Webster didn't have anything else to do at the moment, as the young man helped set up a tactical net between all of the recently bonded human Guardians. The last of whom had only bonded two days previous. The entire newly assembled Guardian fleet was scheduled to begin war maneuvers in two days.

Julie had high hopes that Emie would talk to her after the general meeting. The First Guardian had left so suddenly after the meeting that she hadn't been able to reach her in time.

The muted chime from the door to her ready room drew her back from those depressing memories. With a small nudge through the mental bond she shared with the ship, the doors slid open just as the Marine on the other side drew to attention. Julie smiled slightly at the sight. Clarice had stopped following her everywhere she went after their talk earlier, and Julie was finding that she rather liked having the Marine as a friend.

"Clarice, you don't have to come to attention every time you see me you know."

What might have been a swiftly gone smile crossed the Marine's face.

"Yes, Guardian."

Giving up the battle for now, Julie waved her inside. When the Marine stayed where she was, the human looked at her questioningly.

"Your new Lance leader has arrived."

Each Guardian ship would hold a staggering thousand Marines. They weren't all front line soldiers of course, but it still shocked Julie to think about how many people that was. It was only a fraction of her crew number of course. The newly formed Imperial forces had stuck with the old Tiri way of defining their fighting unit strengths. A dagger was ten men, a sword was ten daggers, or a hundred men. While a Lance, was ten swords, or a thousand men. As she understood it, they'd adopted the same system for designating everything from men to Guardians.

"Already? We were just notified that our Marines would start arriving in the general meeting today."

"Shall I send her in, Ma'am?"

"Please, Clarice."

The woman who stepped past the Honor Guard into the ready room was no stranger, even in the new uniform.

"God!"

Smiling the first true smile in what felt like weeks, Julie moved towards the taller, spiky blond and hugged the startled Lance commander.

"Good to see someone missed me, ugh, I think you broke a rib."

Julie laughed and ignored the slightly scandalized look on Clarice's face as she closed the doors to the ready room.

"Sit down, I'll get us something to drink. I think I have some wine if you want?"

"Water if you have it, I'm still on duty for another hour."

The red-haired Guardian made a face at Marine but got them both drinks. Still grinning, she took her seat behind the desk and saluted the ex-sniper with her glass.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were on your way to Mars Base?"

Shrugging, God, better known as Katya, took a sip of the cold water.

"Got into a fight with Winston. He wanted me to resign and come live at the palace. I told him to shove it and well, things went downhill from there."

"You are a very strange woman, you do know that right? Most people would jump on a chance like that."

Katya snorted, making a very unlady like gesture.

"Please, I haven't seen him at all since when we met with you at Longbow. He's always off running around the world fixing problems. I told him I'd resign my commission if I could go with him. He hemmed and hawed about that not being a good idea. So I walked out and put in a transfer. They had an opening for me here, so I grabbed my guys and took it."

"Your guys?"

"Hell yes, my sword is already onboard, they shipped up with me. The others will be arriving over the rest of the day."

Pale eyes narrowed thoughtfully as Katya studied the Guardian.

"You really didn't know I was onboard did you? Shouldn't you have sensed my drop ships docking with Southern Cross?"

It was Julie's turn to look a bit uncomfortable at that. She should have, that was true. She'd just been busy.

Thinking about Emily and trying to com her. Damn it!

"Yeah, well, I was trying to get in touch with Emie. She's avoiding me."

"Oh because of the whole Bak'ra engineered thing?"

Julie spluttered wine in surprise at that, and stared wide-eyed at the laughing Katya.

"Oh please, I'm not completely out of the loop you know."

"Who knows?"

Julie tried to get over the shock, she'd thought that only the Guardians knew about it. Most of them hadn't even seemed to care, taking the fact that the First Guardian hadn't acted as a good sign.

"Most of Imperial officers. I'd guess most of the better intelligence services on Earth do by now also."

Julie just blinked in astonishment.

"Oh come on, Julie, as if that changes who you are. You saved my life back in Plattsburgh, remember? I think I can trust you. Now what's this about Miss High and Mighty?"

Taking a rather large gulp of the wine, Julie waved a hand, trying to get her thoughts straightened out.

"She's pretty much ignored me since we got back from New York."

"So is it because of the Bak'ra thing?"

"Of course it's because of the Bak'ra thing!" Julie snapped, and Katya held up both hands in a placating manor.

"Alright, alright. I see that you're a bit on edge about it."

The redhead knew it wouldn't do any good at all yelling at God about it, but she came darned close anyway.

"Hey, did you get to see 5th Avenue while you were in New York?"

Green eyes rolled as Julie picked up her empty glass and returned it to the bar to be cleaned later.

"Katya, we touched down, I got into an elevator and we were taken prisoner. I didn't have the time."

"Perfect."

Whenever God used that tone of voice, Julie generally got worried. Turning around to look at the smiling Lance commander, Julie got a bit more worried. Licking her lips, she decided to probe carefully.

"Why?"

"We can go together and blow off Emily and Winston at the same time!"

That sounded promising, and despite her better intentions, Julie found herself already liking the idea, whatever it was.

"How would we go about that?"

"Simple, I get off duty in an hour. My second in command won't have a problem getting things settled for the rest of the day. You and I take a shuttle and we go down to do some shopping. I've always wanted to shop on 5th Avenue."

"They'd probably be angry if they found out what we did."

Julie felt compelled to put up the token objection.

"So? They both deserve it for pissing us off."

The blond had a point.

"Deal. See you in Shuttle Bay One in an hour?"

"Good, I love it when I great plan comes together. See you then!"

It occurred to Julie only after God had left that neither of them had talked about the arriving Marines yet.

"They did WHAT?"

Emily stared in disbelief at her older brother, who just nodded and shrugged.

"What can I say, Emie, they went down to New York, and I quote from the message Katya sent me, "To go shopping". That's all I know."

Emily covered her face with both hands. It wasn't enough that Julie would go planet side. But she had gone back to the city she'd been taken prisoner in no less than a week ago.

"Dear Maker, kill me now."

Winston didn't sound all that much happier as he agreed.

"I just got the note, I was in meetings with the European Union all day long."

One blue eye opened to eye the com panel.

"How long ago did they leave?"

"Six hours ago."

Emily felt the beginnings of a great headache coming on.

"Has anyone seen or heard from them?"

"I contacted Theo before comming you. He said that their shuttle landed six hours ago and that the six of them took a ferry ride over to Manhattan. What do you want to do?"

Emily eyed her brother darkly.

"What do I want to do? I want to go down there, find them, and yell at them until they understand how stupid it was to go off without telling us!"

"And how do you want to find them in New York? They're shopping, that's even worse than being held prisoner."

Winston did have a very valid point, and Emily sat back down.

"You sure they aren't in trouble? You know how Julie is. Even if our diplomatic relations with the United States is back on firm footing, that's New York City. Not exactly the safest place in the world to start with."

"With attracting Trouble, with a large T? Yes, I know very well how Julie is so don't worry, I'll let you know if I hear anything. Tell Katya I've been trying to get a hold of her all day long if you see them before I do."

At least the two of them took the Honor Guard with them. Clarice will be there, so I can hope she's keeping them out of trouble. God and Julie together in New York, dear Maker, I don't think I want to know what trouble they could get into.

The com went dark and Emily growled at it. When it failed to give her the answers she wanted, she strode out onto the Command Deck, waving people back to their stations before they had started to salute.

"Angwar."

He knew her well enough to frown in worry as he approached the First Guardian.

"Yes, Emie?"

"I want you to keep an eye out for a shuttle returning from Governor's Island to Southern Cross."

"Yes, Ma'am."

He looked a bit puzzled as she started walking towards the exit from the Command Deck.

"First Guardian?"

She never even slowed her stride as she passed through the large armored doors.

"Yes, Provost?"

"Where will you be?"

"On Southern Cross."

Angwar looked back at the rest of the Command Deck, catching the slightly worried looks North Star's officers were sharing. He didn't blame them at all. The tone of the First Guardian's voice boded ill for whoever had raised her ire, and he had a distinct impression he knew who that was.

"Jarris, keep an eye on orbital traffic. Let me know if any shuttles left off from Governor's Island and head to Southern Cross."

The sensor officer was a good steady sort, he didn't even bat an eyelash at the request.

"Yes, Provost."

Julie smiled brightly to those crewmembers that she passed in the corridors. The brightly colored shopping bags that she carried, as well as those that the other members of the Honor Guard carried, were testimonial to the shopping spree she and Katya had gone on.

She'd managed to spend a years worth of her pay from her time at Majestic in six hours of marathon shopping, but it had been fun. They'd hit every store that they could on 5th Avenue and then quite a few that weren't. It had been decadent, fun, and exactly what she'd needed to avoid the depths of a full-blown depression. Katya had taken her own bags, slightly less in number than those Julie had assembled, off to her own quarters. She'd done a brief check of Southern Cross's status on the way up, and assured herself that her ship self was in one piece. Other than that, Julie had managed to forget about anything to do with the Tiri or Bak'ra.

Well, nearly everything.

She'd found herself hoping to catch sight of a familiar blue eyes throughout the evening.

Clarice had suffered through the shopping spree in near silent martyrdom, as had the other three Honor Guards. Opening the door to her quarters, Julie stopped in shock as a voice from inside greeted her.

"So good of you to show up, Guardian McGrath. Clarice, you can put down your rifle, I'm not quite ready to shoot Julie."

Clarice had moved faster than Julie had thought possible, and had pulled the smaller woman aside, aiming her rifle into the room. The First Guardian sneered at the weapon and pointed at Julie.

"You and I need to talk. Now."

The angry commanding tone was not lost on Julie and she felt her hackles raise. Ignoring Emily for a moment, she waved the Honor Guard members inside telling a sheepish Clarice, "just put the bags down inside. I'll sort them out later after my guest leaves."

The two women said nothing as the Marines did as bid, and hastily excused themselves. Angrily, Julie grabbed one of the bags and stormed past the First Guardian, moving into the bedroom beyond, and dumping the contents out onto her bed. Feeling the taller woman move and follow, she whirled around and let a week of frustration and fear fuel her anger.

"How dare you barge into my quarters!"

The older woman laughed, a cold hard bitter laugh.

"How dare I? How dare you go back to the place that I just RESCUED you from?"

Green eyes blazing with as much fury as the blue ones staring at her had, Julie stalked forward until she was so close she could feel the heat of the First Guardian's body.

"How dare I? Who are you to ask me that? You haven't even acknowledged that I existed for the last week! Now you want to control my life when I'm not on duty? Screw it, First Guardian. My commanding officer doesn't get that option. Or were you worried that I was going to pass secrets to some Bak'ra who miraculously survived?"

Her verbal tirade actually made Emily step backwards away from the sheer blazing anger lashing out at her. The angry part of her, the part that felt lost and betrayed, lashed out.

"Is that what you were trying to do, betray us?"

Emily sneered, moving forward and forcing the smaller woman backwards this time.

"Yes Emily, that's what I was doing, throwing away the future of my planet! That's why I even brought along the spy you assigned to me and Katya, because I knew they'd go along with it."

Julie had run out of room to back up in her back against the wall. They were yelling at each other now, face-to-face.

"I didn't send her to spy on you."

"Oh no? Really, you could have fooled me! That's why she carries around some Cynaomarist right?"

Emily had no answer to that and she gritted her teeth in frustration.

"I sent her to keep an eye on you and protect you."

"Sure you did. You just cared so much about me that you were busy every time I tried to talk to you right?"

It was Emily's turn to back away from the incensed smaller woman.

"You don't understand!"

"Understand what? That you're trying to pretend I don't exist because," Julie's voice broke but she forced herself to continue, "I was created by them? Do you hate them so much?"

Emily's resolve nearly broke at the hurt look in those green eyes, but the memory of the fall of Tiri Prime put her back on the offensive.

"Them? The Bak'ra? The people who destroyed my world? I don't just hate them, I want to see them all die a slow painful death. I want to be able to watch them suffer like we've suffered."

The grief, anger and loss in her voice forced Julie backwards this time. A small corner of the First Guardian's brain, the one that had the annoying tendency to argue with her, wondered who was winning this fight. Emily ignored it.

Julie sagged back against the bulkhead behind her, the anger draining from her, and just leaving sorrow and a familiar aching loneliness.

"So you blame me for what they did to your world, Emie? Is that it?"

There really wasn't any answer that Emily could come up with for that one. So the First Guardian did the only thing she could think of to end an argument that was hurting her as much as the young human.

The kiss wasn't planned, hell it wasn't even supposed to happen.

Then somehow they were both pressed up against the wall, mouths hungrily pressed against each other. Emily wasn't certain who groaned first, but she didn't care. Her uniform was too tight and she was too hot. She desperately wanted to touch and caress the body molded against hers. When Julie cupped a breast in her hands, Emily gasped in surprise and arousal.

The taller woman slid her hands down the redhead's back, tugging the Guardian uniform open as she did. It was harder than she thought it would be, her hands kept misbehaving and stroking the smooth skin underneath. Julie's hands began to freely roam across her chest and stomach, stroking and learning. They were both panting by the time Emily stripped the uniform down off Julie's shoulders.

The sight was enough to make wetness flood between her legs and Emily could no longer even pretend to be in control. Cupping those perfect, lightly freckled breasts in both hands, she watched in fascination as Julie's eyes fluttered shut. The First Guardian was entranced by the red moist lips that begged for her attention, and she pushed the uniform down to Julie's waist.

"This is a bad idea... ah, oh god."

Emily didn't want to think about it, so she didn't even let Julie finish, sliding her hands down between skin and uniform, to cup the firm ass of the smaller woman. Sliding a long thigh between Julie's legs and tugging her hard against her leg. Emily could feel the heat between Julie's legs and it just served to excite her more.

In an unspoken agreement, they stumbled backwards through a doorway and into the bedroom. Collapsing onto the bed, Julie started to make swift work of Emily's uniform, even as Emily peeled off the last of Julie's. The body beneath was as beautiful as Emily had dreamed it would be. The scent of their excitement wafted in the air, and slick skin slid as they licked, kissed and explored.

Emie finally used her larger frame to flip Julie onto her back and pin her there as she captured a nipple. Suckling it gently, she grinned as she heard the groan of encouragement. Trailing down the toned stomach, Emily slid a finger through short curly hairs.

She is a natural red head...

That was her last somewhat coherent thought before sliding a finger through the wetness waiting for her. Curling upward and in, Emily moaned in pleasure as Julie spread her legs and arched upward into her touch.

She watched in fascination as her fingers, first one, then an added second, slipped into Julie. The liquid heat, which surrounded them, nearly pushed the taller woman over the edge. She was on the razor's edge of desire as it was.

"Yes, god yes, please!"

Julie arched upward, trying to meet her thrusts and Emily could wait no longer. The young human wasn't even certain who she was pleading with; all that she knew was that she was going to die if Emily stopped. Emily was beyond hearing words, only listening to the thrumming heartbeat, the slick sweat, the shift of muscles, in the body she was claiming. Lacing fingers with Julie, she planted kisses across the scorching skin, tasted the sweet sweat which covered them both, down Julie's naval and inner thigh. Then her mouth covered the bundle of nerves just above where her fingers thrust into Julie, and Julie screamed her name.

Clarice St. John tilted her head until the vertebrae in her neck realigned. With a pleased sigh she dumped the last of her armor onto the chair and began field stripping her side arm. Rifles weren't

carried onboard ship unless she was on duty, but she was allowed to keep her sidearm with her at all times. Which was fine as far as she was concerned.

The priority beep of the com unit a few minutes later almost made her lose the induction coil. Muttering curses, she reached over and flicked on the screen, hoping that Guardian McGrath hadn't decided to go shopping again. She'd left the night shift of Honor Guards on duty after they had returned to Southern Cross. The Marine really didn't want to get suited up again this evening.

Clarice was more than a bit surprised to see Provost Angwar staring at her with an odd look on his face when the com unit powered up.

"Provost? Is there something I can do for you?"

She was wondering if he had maybe commed the wrong unit since the First Guardian was in Julie's quarters last she knew, arguing.

"As a matter of fact I think there is, Lieutenant."

Clarice raised an eyebrow and waited for the Provost to continue.

"What can I do for you sir?"

"Well, you see..." the Provost looked over his shoulder at the Command Deck of North Star and leaned closer to the video pick up, lowering his voice. "I think you should get up to Southern Cross's Command Deck."

"Sir? Why?"

She was already reaching for her pistol belt though.

"I believe that Emily and Julie have, ah, reconciled their differences."

The slightly embarrassed tone to his voice brought a confused look to her face and she shook her head, not understanding.

"I don't understand what you mean, Provost."

Looking more than mildly embarrassed this time, Angwar tugged a bit self-consciously at his uniform jacket.

"They have Reconciled their Differences and are now Together."

Clarice blinked at the odd way the Provost was stressing his words, and then blinked again when she understood what he was saying.

"You mean..."

"Yes, together. So please, Lieutenant, if you would get up to the Command Deck?"

"Ah, I mean, yes Sir."

"Thank you."

She shut the com unit off and grabbed her belt with a laugh. Good, so they were Together were they? They deserved it and about time they figured things out. Still, best that she get to the Command Deck and quickly. They were probably trying to figure out what all the strange readings they were getting were coming from.

The bond between Guardian and ship self was a two way one, and at least some of what Julie was feeling would be transmitted through her bond. Clarice just hoped that engineering was on the ball, or they might have a reactor go into emergency shut down after a sudden power spike.

Depending on how good the First Guardian was of course.

Clarice grinned wider and decided she might want to warn Engineering.

Lieutenant, junior grade, Daniel Webster looked around with something verging on panic in his usually mild blue eyes. He reached up to adjust the glasses that he no longer wore, thanks to the regen treatments. The nervous reaction didn't even register with him as he converted the motion to running a hand through his hair.

"Sir, Engineering says that they've got another power spike in number two reactor."

Webster was, unfortunately, the most senior officer on the Command Deck at the moment. The Chief Engineer was on her way, but she had been buried in Southern Crosses bow. It would take her at least another minute to get to the Command deck. The Engineering officer looked just as worried as Webster felt.

"Yuis, try to com Guardian McGrath again?"

Yuis, his replacement at the communications console just shook his head and tried again to raise the ships Guardian.

"Sir, we've got some weird readings coming from sensors."

The added report from the sensor tech didn't help and Webster rubbed at the sweat on his forehead. He was just a Junior Lieutenant! A communications officer even! He didn't know what to do, heck he wasn't even certain what was going on.

"Damn it, we're not supposed to be having problems like this in Earth Orbit!"

No one chose to answer his outburst, and he felt his cheeks flame.

The engineering tech peered closer to her readouts and looked back at him worriedly.

"Um, Sir? I don't know what's going on, but I've got another power spike. It's like the ship's reactors are getting ready to blow!"

Webster blanched at that, a fusion reactor going was not a good thing. He was just about to order General Quarters when the sound of the lift doors opening stopped him. He hoped, prayed it was someone more senior to him. The Marine's posted at the entrance to the Command Deck stiffened to attention as the lift's rider entered.

Webster could have cried in relief.

Even if Clarice wasn't part of the Imperial navy, she was senior to him at least. Despite himself he realized that the Honor Guard commander was quite attractive once you got her out of all the battle armor.

"Mr. Webster, are you having problems?"

Her tone was just the slightest bit amused and Webster licked his lips, doing his best to at least appear in control.

"I've got some problems Lieutenant, do you know where I can find the Guardian?"

The Marine smirked as she moved towards the Big Chair that he'd been occupying so peacefully a few moments earlier. The Guardians couch was right next to it, a reminder of who exactly controlled the ship.

"Yes I do, and you're not going to bother her about this. Power down the reactors to minimum power output and just ignore any of the odd readings on sensors, you might want to shut down communications also."

"Ah, Ma'am, what's going on?"

"I'll tell you when your older Mr. Webster. For now, why don't you get on that power down ok?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Miriam, the Engineering officer, was the first to understand what was going on. To her credit she restrained herself to a small chuckle. Webster got it after he gave the order to power down. His blue eyes widened comically and he stuttered.

"The Guardians... she's, oh."

Clarice just laughed.

The smell of sex was heavy in the air, and Julie smiled lazily as she traced a finger across her companion's chest. Resting her head on Emily's shoulder she didn't even try to resist happily humming. When the shoulder she was using as a pillow shook, Julie poked the First Guardian in the stomach.

"Hey!"

"Sorry, but no laughing is allowed. You are now my personal pillow."

"I am huh?"

"Oh yes, sorry Emie, this is your new lot in life."

"I guess I could get used to it. Maybe. What sort of bonuses do I get?"

Julie raised her head just enough to smile slowly at her friend, after brushing the hair out of her eyes. For some strange reason her hair was all mused up. Licking her lips she waggled her eyebrows.

"All sorts of things."

"How could I resist an offer like that?"

"How indeed."

Happily, Julie snuggled closer, sliding a naked leg over Emily's and wrapping herself around the taller woman. The sheets had been tossed aside sometime during the past few hours of lovemaking, and she just couldn't work up the energy to go get them. Besides, the First Guardian made a wonderful heat source. A quick check with her bond to her ship self showed that they had another two hours before they had to get up. Just enough time for her to take a quick nap, she'd even closed her eyes and started to drift away when Emie's voice jerked her awake.

"I'm sorry."

The words were nearly whispered and Julie wondered if she'd dreamed them for a moment.

"It hurt a lot when you wouldn't talk with me, Emie."

"I know, and I'm sorry, Julie. I just, I still have to work it out."

Julie closed her eyes and hugged her friend tightly. She'd wanted to believe that things were all better now, but of course that wasn't true. Burying her face in a thick mane of black hair she whispered, "please don't ignore me again?"

"I won't, no matter what, I promise we'll work it out together. This, *you*, means too much to me. I don't want to lose you because of it, Julie."

"Good, because if you do, I'm going to have to kick your ass, First Guardian."

Satiated blue eyes looked down at the redhead nestled against her with fondness.

"That so?"

Julie nodded and started to answer when she blinked at something she'd stumbled across in her brief check through her ship bond.

"Hey, Emily?"

"Hmmm?"

The First Guardian, Julie had discovered, almost purred when she was happy.

"Why did your Provost put through a priority communication to Clarice?"

Emily shrugged slightly, a gesture that caused Julie to slide her head a bit further down the First Guardian's body.

"Probably to go explain to your Command crew why their readings went wacky for a while."

The blood drained from Julie's face and she pushed herself up so that she could stare down at Emily's face.

"Oh God. You mean they know what we've been doing?"

The smirk on the larger woman's face was not comforting.

"Emily, tell me that they don't know what we've been doing all night!"

"Alright, but I would be lying to you, Julie."

Julie closed her eyes and covered her hands.

"Oh God."

Emily touched her fingertips to Julie's chin and waited for the redhead to open her eyes.

"Julie, it's just one of those things you have to get used to. You don't have much control during... I mean, well, release. Sometimes there are even power spikes."

Julie groaned incoherently and burrowed back into the welcoming warmth, reaching down and dragging up a blanket this time to hide under also.

"I'm never going to be able to face them. I'll just have to get an entirely new command staff."

Emily chuckled and stroked her hair, waiting until Julie calmed down a bit.

"Don't worry, sweetheart."

They lay like that for a while, each soaking in the presence of the other. The pleasant tangle of limbs and not knowing where one person began and the other ended.

"Hey, Emie?"

"Hmm?"

"I know who I want for a Provost."

"Good, about time. Who?"

"Clarice. I trust her and she knows what to do after being around you so long."

Emily placed a kiss against Julie's forehead and grinned. She was certain that Julie's choice was going to raise a few complaints, a Marine for a Provost? She was also just as certain that it was a good choice, and that Clarice would make a great Provost.

"She's a good choice."

"Emie?"

"Hmm?"

"We've got an hour and a half until we need to get up."

The grin turned into a slow, sexy smile and Emily rolled them over until she was on top of the smaller woman.

"Oh really?"

Julie nodded and slid a hand behind the First Guardian's neck, drawing her downward. Just before their lips touched she murmured, "I wonder what we'll do to pass the time."

Emily grinned as they tasted each other on their lips.

"I have a few suggestions."

They showed each other quite a few over the next hour.

It's the old pains that get you when you least expect them.

~Guardian Mary Eilsen

Chapter Nine

The Human spirit was a strange and wonderful thing, at least from a Tiri perspective. The Tiri had been on Earth for over sixty years, and for the most part they had adapted to human kind, but it had taken a while. The never-ending ability of humans to adapt and not only survive in changing conditions, but thrive in them, was a constant source of amazement. Emily doubted that there were many Tiri who could have managed to adapt to such profound changes so quickly.

In fact, she knew there weren't. Of the thousands of Tiri who had survived the Evacuation, many had been in a near state of comatose shock for months. Some had never recovered. They were still mostly comatose, watched around the clock at Mars Base.

"First Guardian, all Guardian ships report ready for commencement of war games."

"Thank you, Angwar."

Emily smiled as she sank down into her command couch. These Guardians and the crews of the ships who had newly been assigned to their battle groups; they had not only adapted, but were thriving. She shifted slightly as she leaned back, letting her bond with her ship self increase slightly. The First Guardian grinned wryly; she was sore in some interesting places.

"Com, give me a broad band link to all fleet ships."

Simon, the on-duty Com officer, had been standing by for just such an order and only had to press a button to activate North Star's powerful communications systems.

"Com channel's open, Ma'am, fleet wide signal."

"Thank you, Simon."

Emily knew she had a tendency to be a bit abrupt during stressful times, so she did her best to make up for that when things were working smoothly. Memories of last night had been ambushing her all day long now, and she felt an almost overwhelming urge to call up a picture of Julie. *Dear Maker, I'm so gone.*

Hoping that her face didn't show what she had been thinking about, the head of Guardian Command addressed those assembled ships and crews. There weren't as many of them as she had

hoped for, but for now they would have to do. Others would come online soon, but they would be short on training time.

"Ladies and Gentleman, Marines and Navy, crewmen and Guardians. Today you begin to practice for what is coming to your, *our*, home. For the next while, we will be practicing fleet maneuvers, after which you will commence war game maneuvers. Your world, all of mankind, is depending on us. So let's get to it shall we?"

A nod to Simon and the com channel closed. Almost instantly she tasted the amusement through a channel with Southern Cross. Grinning, Emily sent a mental caress through that link, even as the other Guardians checked in and the day's exercises began.

"I take it things with Ms. McGrath have been settled?"

Angwar murmured as he stepped up next to her couch quietly, holding a data pad. Emily felt her cheeks grow warm and the First Guardian steadfastly ignored the slight smirk on her Provost's face.

"Yes, I think so."

"Good. If you don't mind me saying, Emie, she's good for you."

Emily arched an eyebrow at that, spearing him with her gaze and waited for him to explain himself.

"Ah, I mean, she's a beautiful young lady. I'm certain she likes you quite a lot, and well, I mean. You are more relaxed now."

"Don't you have something else to do, Angwar?"

Angwar grinned and nodded his head.

"Yes, Ma'am."

Emily chuckled softly, watching her Provost head away, and whispering, "you're right old friend, she *is* good for me."

Julie groaned and leaned back against the back of the command couch. She'd just spent her longest time yet deep in her ship self. Coming back to her body was an odd feeling, her body felt ungainly. *This headache isn't helping at all either.*

Groaning, the redhead forced her eyes opened and blinked in surprise at the two people waiting next to the couch.

"Clarice? Doctor?"

The doctor, an older lady with hair that had once been red itself, now streaked with gray, and a personality that rivaled Emie's for sheer force, handed her a glass filled with some sort of purple liquid.

"Drink."

Julie would have asked what was in it, but her body suddenly realized how thirsty and hungry she was. The liquid turned out to taste like a sort of milk shake, and Julie smiled tiredly at her ship doctor.

"Thanks, Doc. What's in this?"

"It's a protein sugar shake that the Tiri use to boost energy levels for their Guardians. You guys have some problems when you go into your bond for so long."

Grimacing, the doctor finished running a med scan device over her and pointed a finger at Julie.

"Take a rest, you're at the edge of your reserves as is."

"Yes, Doc."

Julie grinned as the doctor scowled and stalked back off the command deck.

"She's in a good mood," Julie muttered, taking a sip of the drink once more and looking toward her new Provost curiously.

"Guardian Command sent out the rankings for the last combat maneuvers."

Julie winced slightly at that. She thought that Southern Cross and her battle group, two heavy cruisers, and a recently assigned destroyer, had done fairly well. They had still made some fairly large errors, and she was certain that Emie was going to have some words about some of those. That and her Battle Group had been off, she'd personally spotted quite a few errors in the smaller ships handling.

There was no room for error when one was maneuvering a five-kilometer long ship.

Clarice handed over the pad, still grinning.

Julie looked at her oddly and then looked back down at the data pad. Blinking twice to make certain that she was looking at the right data. It was amazing how fast the fatigue could disappear.

"We're first on the list!"

Emie had even tacked on a personal note she saw, congratulating her for doing so well. That, somehow, made her feel even better than seeing their battle group listed first.

"Provost, do you think that this would be nice to be posted for the crew to see?"

"Why, Guardian, I believe so."

"Could you see that this is posted then?"

"My pleasure, Guardian."

Grinning, Julie left her new Provost to it, and touched the edge of her ship bond. She was still too tired to sink back into it, but that didn't mean she couldn't use some of her ship functions.

It was becoming easier and easier to do that, she noted absently; loving the warm feeling curling through her stomach as she sent a signal to North Star. The entire group was out beyond Mars orbit now, near the inner edge of the asteroid belt. They didn't dare practice beyond the sensor shell that the Tiri had constructed. The chance of the Bak'ra spotting so many Warp gates forming was far too high. It was, Julie admitted, a beautiful place. "Looking" inwards towards Earth she could "see" the sun and Venus just swinging into view.

The touch of the First Guardian's response to her com jerked her back from the view though, admittedly, she went willingly.

Julie, how are you doing?

Julie felt her lips curl into a smile at the greeting.

I'm doing great. Feels great to see Southern Cross number one on the list!

Laughter echoed back down the channel.

You did good, Sweetheart. Not perfect of course, but you did well.

Wait a second, what do you mean not perfect? We were nearly perfect, Emie!

She was laughing even as she said it though, and she knew that Emily didn't buy it. The First Guardian's snort didn't disappoint her.

Just make sure you take a good long look at the notes I put on the evaluation you'll be getting shortly. I seem to remember you nearly inverting your gravitic drives?

Julie winced, sinking a bit deeper into her couch. She'd been hoping that Emily wouldn't bring that up. She'd gotten slightly confused for a split second during the heart of the maneuvers. Hurriedly she decided to switch topics.

Ahm, yes well, what are you up to tonight?

Well, let's see here, I was hoping to curl up around a certain redhead, but I guess I could do something with you instead. Are you offering?

Green eyes narrowed as she considered that.

I don't really know now. I might just have plans with another tall, dark and devastatingly beautiful lady.

You think I'm devastatingly beautiful?

I said another tall dark and devastatingly beautiful lady, not you.

Julie nearly purred this time as the First Guardian's laughter echoed through the link. She was really starting to love that deep sultry laughter.

Cute, Julie, very cute. Could I tempt you away from this other devastatingly beautiful woman then?

Depends what you had in mind, First Guardian.

Hm, how's dinner and then relaxing in North Star's observation lounge?

It was a really tough decision but somehow Julie managed to make a choice.

See you at nineteen hundred then? I have to meet with my new Battle Group Captains first.

Sounds good, I have a meeting with Father first. See you then, Julie.

"Father."

The old man's blue eyes seemed wearier than ever to Emily as he regarded her from the com screen. There was a slight delay, being this far out from Mars, just enough to be noticeable. A faint smile crossed the Emperor's face at the greeting and he nodded gravely.

"Daughter. How are the new Guardians working out?"

It never paid to underestimate the Emperor, so Emily answered a bit cautiously. Not knowing where her father was taking this quite yet.

"Well enough. They made the usual first time errors, but I'll wring those out of them soon enough. Was there something in particular you were interested in, Father? I'll be submitting a full report to the Senate tomorrow."

He waved one emaciated hand in front of the video pick up at that and grinned a bit less wearily.

"I know you will be, Daughter, but I wanted your firsthand opinions. What do you think our chances are?"

It was Emily's turn to grin wearily as she shook her head.

"Maker only knows, Father, but I can tell you that we just don't have enough time to go with our first plan. I'm going to officially recommend that we go with Beta 12."

Since her father's expression didn't change at all, she rather suspected he had known she was going to do that. It didn't mean either of them was going to be happy with it though.

"That's a risky plan, Daughter."

"I know, Father, we knew that when we drew it up, but we simply don't have any other choice. We can't let the Bak'ra dictate the rules of engagement on this one. We need to know where they are going to enter the system."

"So you'll take the other Tiri Guardians and go out to meet them, then draw them into a meeting with the new Guardians? It sounds simple enough, Emie, but can you guarantee that you'll get all of them?"

"We'll meet them at Char, and then keep up a general "retreat" to Sol. They won't know about the human Guardians yet, and we can ambush them. If need be, we'll fall back and use Earth's orbital defense forts as well."

"And if they know about the human Guardians?"

Emily's gaze was crystalline blue as she answered, her tone hard.

"Then we will take as many of them down with us as we can."

"We'll do the best we can, Daughter. I won't lose another civilization without a fight. I'll be looking forward to your action report tomorrow."

"Yes, Father."

Just before she terminated the com though, Emily frowned in thought.

"Father? Have you heard anything from Lorin about us getting some more support ships?"

The fleet was barely at fifty percent of its lighter hulls, with each Guardian class ship only being supported by two or three smaller ships, compared to the six or even seven, that was usual for a Guardian battle group. It was one of the First Guardian's greatest worries, that her people

wouldn't be supported the way they needed to be. Her father's answer did nothing to encourage her.

"I spoke with Lorin earlier, she says that they are expediting, but don't get your hopes up, Emie. They had to divert a lot of resources to getting the planetary shield up. You missed the test run by the way, it was quite a show, as you can imagine."

Indeed she could, when the shield had come up, it would have disintegrated everything in low Earth orbit. It would have been a global fireworks display the likes of which would have put any meteor shower to shame. Her father went on, a decidedly amused glint in his eyes now.

"Good thing Ms. McGrath came up with her suggestion or we might not have the shield tested even now."

To her embarrassment, Emie could feel her cheeks heating as she fought a blush. Memories from last night didn't help at all. Slick skin sliding against skin, fingers plunging into... the warm sweet taste...

Clearing her throat and doing her best to keep her voice level, Emily tried to reign in her thoughts.

"She's quite smart."

"You keep a hold of that one, you got me, Daughter? She's good for you, and I'm darn glad to hear you're over this Bak'ra stuff with her."

Black eyebrows raised in surprise at that. How had her father known about that? Even better, how had he known she'd mostly made peace with her doubts and fears last night while holding a naked Julie.

The Emperor laughed, a sound that was far too rare these days.

"I talked to your Provost, Emie. Angwar's a good man. I'm glad he's watching your back for you. Take care, Daughter, and I'll look forward to that report."

"I'll send it tomorrow, Father, and I'll send another after we finish our first serious war game. Be well, Father. Honor, Wisdom, and Strength."

"Honor, Wisdom, and Strength."

With that, the screen blanked, showing only the Guardian symbol. A sword posed point down before a shield.

Emily hoped that shield would be up to what was coming toward it.

Julie hummed happily to herself as she mentally debated what to wear that evening for her dinner with Emie. *A dress? Hmm, difficult in zero g, ok, how about just my regular uniform? No, I don't want her thinking she's First Guardian anymore than need be. Ok, so something simple. Slacks and a nice blouse sound good.*

It was a good day, even the headache she'd had from being so deeply in the bond with her ship self for so long had gone away. Grinning, she ducked into her ready room, grabbed a few data pads she'd read, and headed back out. She was still having the hardest time looking any of her command staff in the eye without blushing, but she was getting better at it. Clarice wasn't making it easy at all though. Her new Provost, it seemed, was enjoying being able to tease the Guardian at any chance she got.

Like now for example.

Clarice had risen from her station, no doubt reviewing her new duties as a Provost and grinned.

"Leaving, Guardian?"

Quite certain that everyone on the deck was listening, she even caught Webster peeking over his shoulder at them, Julie forced a smile.

"Yes, Provost, after I meet with the battle group's Captains, you have command."

"Might I ask where I can reach the Guardian if I need to, after your meeting?"

I'm going to get you for this, Clarice.

Gritting her teeth, Julie answered, "I'll be on North Star if you need me afterward, Provost."

She hissed the title, annoyed beyond words when Clarice just smiled in response.

"Have a good night, Guardian. I trust you will, of course, be taking your Honor Guard members with you."

Managing not to groan, Julie just waved a hand and headed off the command deck. She swore if she caught any of them smirking they'd be out on the hull repainting it for the rest of their lives, which would probably be quite short if the First Guardian found out about them making her angry. With that mental image to keep her spirits buoyed, Julie stepped past the on duty guards and into the lift. The trip to her cabin was short, and she spent the time wondering if she could get the First Guardian to skip dinner and just go directly to dessert.

It was with the very pleasant image of showing off some of the things she'd bought in New York to an appreciative First Guardian that the door com sounded. Stacking the last of her pads on the smaller desk she'd had installed in her rooms, she headed for the door, calling out.

"Yes?"

Vasily, the on duty Honor Guard, answered her in a still heavily accented Tiri.

"Southern Cross's Battle Group Captains here to see you, Ma'am."

"Thank you, Eric, send them in."

The three figures waiting, more or less patiently, outside her quarters were an odd group of people. Julie felt her eyebrows start to raise as she took a good look at them as they each came inside and saluted. They were all military, that was for certain, but who's military was anybody's guess. The three ships had only been assigned to Southern Cross this morning, and Julie hadn't even had time to do more than com each of them before they'd started maneuvers.

First through the door was Captain Robin Yu, the first, as Emily understood it, woman to command a fighting ship from the United States. She was the Captain of the Ranger, a small ship at "only" nine hundred meters in length. The Captain's back was ramrod straight as she came to attention, her Asian American descent rather obvious in her name.

Second was a man who was taller than even Emie. His shoulders had a slight slump to them, and his beard had some definite gray streaks through it. Piercing brown eyes watched her critically, and Julie had the urge to salute him. That he was Russian was never a doubt as Vasily went as far as to salute the man as he passed. Captain Kuguar Panteleyev, his reputation preceded him, had been pulled from retired status in the Ukraine. He now was now the Captain of the new Heavy Cruiser, The Kiev.

Julie wondered how he had managed to bribe his crew into choosing that name when their ship had been put on active duty.

The last man to enter was the Captain of the second Heavy Cruiser, The Saipan. The anger that flashed through his nearly black eyes startled Julie, and she stiffened in an instinctive response to it. Captain Reed Smith had the boyish good looks of an actor, and Julie wondered what his problem was.

"Captains welcome to Southern Cross. Please, make yourselves comfortable. Can I get any of you something to drink?"

She knew it wasn't what would be viewed as a formal greeting through most militaries, but Julie really didn't care. These people would be in charge of ships dedicated to keeping Southern Cross in one piece and helping her ship self destroy anything in its way. She wanted to know these people, to be able to trust them.

"No thank you, Ma'am."

That from Robin, she just got a short shake of his head in answer from Captain Smith, both of who remained standing a tad awkwardly. Captain Panteleyev had taken her words at face value and had relaxed on her couch.

"Tea if you have it, Ma'am."

As she moved about the small kitchen area attached to her quarters, she kept an eye on her three guests.

"Southern Cross and her Battle Group are number one on the list."

Returning, she offered Kuguar his drink and taking her own glass of water with her as she perched on one of the chairs.

"Congratulations. I hope we can keep this up. I know you've seen my Provost, Clarice, and if you have any problems you can always contact her. I'd like to get together with all of you tomorrow before we start the war games to see about improving our coordination."

Robin and Kuguar seemed to be listening to her intently, but Reed was nearly openly sneering. Julie made a mental note to take a good look at her new Captain's service files.

"I've got about an hour before I'm due at an engagement. Let's see what we can come up with tomorrow, shall we?"

Julie wasn't, despite all her recent intensive training, a Naval officer by predilection. She knew she still had a lot of learning to catch up with, and if anything, the learning curve was just as high as it had been during training.

Despite her best efforts, Reed said barely a handful of words throughout the hour-long tactics discussion, and he was the first to leave when she declared it was time for her to get going.

Robin, she found to be rather soft spoken and, if not unsure about her new position, still feeling her way into it. Kuguar was as loud and boisterous as Julie had imagined he would be, and she found herself liking the man.

"He failed out of Guardian training? Really? I didn't know that. He must have gone quickly if I don't remember meeting him."

It took Emily a lot of willpower not to reach over the table and kiss Julie. The young redhead was wearing what could only be described as form-fitting pants and a pale blouse that only served to highlight her hair. Emily wanted desperately to make certain that Julie's lips were as soft and warm as she remembered them. Unfortunately, she also remembered how Julie had glanced around in concern when Emie had pulled out the chair for her.

They were dining on North Star's observation lounge. The large armored view ports next to their table gave a spectacular view of the depths of space at the moment. It was one of five such establishments spread throughout the Guardian-class ship for off duty personnel to relax in. It

doubled as a rather nice bar and restaurant. Each of the lounges had a different atmosphere, but Emily found she liked Lounge One, or Cosmo's as it had come to be known, the best.

"Emie? You still with me?"

Blinking, Emily smiled and focused on her radiant dining companion. Grinning as she took a sip of her red wine and tried to pick up the line of conversation again, and failing when she saw the smile Julie was giving her.

"What were we talking about again?"

Julie laughed and took a sip from her own glass, enjoying the white wine.

"Reed? You know, the Captain of The Saipan?"

A man was definitely the last thing Emily wanted to talk about at the moment, but she knew Julie really was interested.

"Yeah, he barely made it past screening, then failed out the first day."

Green eyes focused on her at that, and Emily could feel the warmth pass between them. Julie smiled a bit shyly then shook her head and continued.

"Ah, so how does one get booted out the first day?"

"One refuses to go through training, demanding that he be allowed to skip ahead since he obviously knew more than the civilians around him. Then one gets caught trying to sneak specs of the new Guardian-class design to American Intel."

Julie opened her mouth in amazement, having to blink several times before she could come up with something intelligent. Emily had to bite her lip to keep from telling her friend how cute she looked.

"What? But we shared everything with them! That's insane! How come he's in charge of a Heavy Cruiser?"

Emie's laughter caused not a few heads to turn their way in surprise. The First Guardian laughing was not a common occurrence.

"Trust me, Julie, if I could, he'd be in charge of an ore shuttle shipping back and forth from Mars to the Asteroid belt. Unfortunately, we don't have enough experienced personnel as it is, and he did make it through his Imperial training after failing Guardian training. I can try to switch him to another Battle Group if you want though?"

Julie sighed, but shook her head, surprising them both by reaching across the tabletop and taking the First Guardian's hand in her own.

"No, that's alright, I'll handle it. But he steps out of line, I'll be certain to smack him around."

Blue eyes sparkled.

"Smack him around?"

Julie smiled and squeezed Emie's hand before letting go and picking up her fork again.

"Well, maybe I'll get my Marines to smack him around. I'm sure God would love the chance."

"Speaking of God," Emily paused as she enjoyed another bite of the pasta, "Winston's coming out to see her tomorrow, but don't warn her. He wants it as some sort of surprise I think."

A quick glance around ensured Julie that they were mostly alone, and Emily watched with interest as the human leaned forward. Her voice lowering as she spoke, and sending pleasant shivers racing up and down Emily's spine, Emie nearly didn't hear what she was saying, she was so taken up in her tone of voice.

"You know, you haven't seen what I bought in New York."

The food was instantly forgotten as Emily leaned forward as well.

"What kind of things are we talking about?"

Julie licked her lips and waggled her eyebrows, obviously enjoying this new game.

"You'll just have to see now, won't you?"

Emily certainly was enjoying this new game, and was hoping it was leading where she thought it was leading.

"Do I get to see now?"

"Depends."

"Oh? Depends on what?"

The smile that she received nearly caused the First Guardian to groan.

"Depends on whether you're taking me to your quarters."

Emily swallowed, wondering how it was possible to be this aroused from just a few words and a touch.

"Now?"

"Now."

Rising, Emily offered her hand to the smaller woman, smiling mischievously. What the younger woman wanted, the First Guardian would gladly give if she could. The warm hand that slipped into hers and the brilliant smile caused another wash of warmth through the First Guardian.

An Ensign was headed her way, carrying what looked suspiciously like a stack of reports. He wisely decided to turn around and bring the reports to her Provost as she narrowed her eyes and bared her teeth. Since the Ensign was not suicidal, he decided to not be flayed alive by an annoyed First Guardian.

Julie took a hold of her arm and chuckled, as they headed for the corridor.

"So that's how you avoid getting reports all the time?"

Emily grinned in answer and nodded, her hand finding a comfortable resting place at the small of Julie's back.

"I'll have to try that."

The mental image of Julie scowling at someone until they decided to leave was enough to make Emily chuckle again.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Emily did her best to look innocent as they headed towards the lifts. By the expression on her beautiful companion's face, Emie was fairly certain she'd failed. The redhead just shook her head though, playfully nudging the taller woman with her hip. Neither of them minded as the Honor Guards got into the lift behind them.

Emily liked her quarters, they were one of the few places where she managed to relax and rest. They were about the same size of Julie's quarters, if located in a different place than those on the most recent generation Guardian ships. The Honor Guards wordlessly stayed outside.

The sudden nervousness strumming from the body next to hers was, Emily sighed, not much of a surprise. She'd expected Julie to become nervous, had almost planned on it in fact. With surprising gentleness, the First Guardian raised Julie's chin with her fingertips. Smiling reassuringly she gently nipped those lips, lightly teasing them both until she felt Julie relax against her.

"It's ok, love."

Julie burrowed her face into Emie's shoulder and the older woman could feel the deep shuddering breath shaking the body she held close.

"I can't believe that everyone knows when we make love."

Emily had been certain that might be a problem for her lover, and she really wished she could do something to help her sort through it.

"They don't care, Julie, in fact, they're happy for us."

"I know, but..."

Emily nuzzled the fine, red hair under her cheek, as Julie's arms tightened around her.

"It's hard, Emie."

"I know. Julie?"

She waited until green eyes peeked up at her before lightly tracing patterns up and down the smaller woman's back. Liking the warm length of the lithe body pressed up against hers.

"We don't have to do anything you know."

The smile that crossed Julie's face made Emily positive she'd managed to say the right thing this time. Shifting in her grasp, Julie slipped her hands up around the back of Emily's neck. Tugging the First Guardian's head lower, the younger woman whispered, their lips just barely brushing together, "it'll keep our crews on their toes right?"

Emily couldn't help the smile that formed on her lips, and she nodded as seriously as she could against the redhead's lips.

"Oh, yes."

"Let's keep them really on their toes then."

At least that was what Emie thought that Julie had whispered, but she wasn't certain since she was concentrating on trying to get the younger woman's blouse off.

Chapter Ten

The insistent snarling sound of a priority com call dragged them both out of deep sleep. Yawning, Julie grudgingly let go of Emie's waist, letting the taller woman slide out of bed and hit the acceptance button.

She was half awake through the conversation that followed, wanting desperately to curl back up with the warm length of the First Guardian and go back to sleep. The blankets still smelled of their lovemaking from the night before and she felt a lazy smile form at the memories. Emily's tone caught her attention and she listened to the last half of the conversation.

The young voice that answered the First Guardian wasn't familiar to the redhead.

"Where did the gate form?"

"Near Pluto, First Guardian."

"What's Intel say?"

"Guardian-Class, Variant Ten."

The pause that followed was long enough for Julie to roll over and study her lover. Emily had a strange look on her face, and when Julie stroked her back, the muscles were tense.

"Do you have a positive identification?"

"No, First Guardian, we just received the preliminary..." The Lieutenant paused and looked at something off the screen, then back at the First Guardian.

"Ma'am, we've just picked up a hail. They are identifying themselves as *The Banshee*, Imperial Guardian Class, Registry number 3443-006789."

Emily knew that number, Julie realized, feeling her love tense even further at that information. The tall woman's voice was like a low rumble vibrating Julie's hand where it rested on her back.

"Send acknowledgement, and my compliments. Ask them to rendezvous here, also send a report to my father and Winston."

"Yes, First Guardian."

The screen went dark, but the First Guardian stayed right where she was; perched on the edge of the bed, back ramrod straight. Sleep all but forgotten, Julie sat up behind her love, and stroked her back.

"Emie? What's going on?"

Julie could see the dark haired woman's jaw work in the dim night lighting.

"After we first arrived here, I asked for volunteers to scout and find out what happened in the rest of the Empire and our Allies. Mira and Talia were the first to volunteer. They were old, Variant Ten ships, but they were small enough to use the new stealth systems we'd been developing."

Julie scooted closer and wrapped her arms around Emie's waist, leaning her head against the tall woman's back. Responding to the old pain in her voice.

"They were supposed to be on an extend scouting mission, twelve years maximum. We gave up on them after three decades had passed."

"Which one of them is *The Banshee*?"

"By the registry number, that's Mira. It wasn't her old ship self's name, she must have changed it."

Julie had never heard of a Guardian changing their ship self's name before and she opened her mouth to ask why she would have done that. Emie beat her to it though, shifting in the loose embrace to tenderly brush a hand along her cheek.

"It's an old tradition. When you lose a loved one, or go through something that you feel changes you completely, you change your ship name. Nearly all of us changed names when we reached Earth."

Understanding what her love was saying she held onto Emie tighter.

"You mean that Talia..."

"Died somewhere along the way."

The taller woman closed her eyes tight and buried her face in Julie's neck. Gently, Julie stroked the thick black hair of the woman she held with a feeling of such tenderness it nearly hurt. Listening as the woman she held whispered in the darkness.

"Mira was my mentor when I went through Guardian training. I sent them to die, Julie, I sent all of them to die. I should have known what was coming. I should have been able to stop it. Should have known it was coming, Maker, they're all dead!"

Julie did what she could, wrapping her arms around the taller woman, holding onto her as if she might fly away. Rocking her as she held her, waiting for the body wrenching sobs to fade. She kept telling her what she could, how she felt, how Emie had kept the Empire together. How Emie was one of the reason's that Earth even stood a chance now.

Julie suspected the First Guardian hadn't ever let herself cry before, and she hugged her tighter. Rocking them both while Emie let the last of the grief go. She'd heard about other Tiri doing that. Just losing it for a few hours, crying, shouting, screaming. Then they'd go back to work, always working.

Trying to save us, despite ourselves sometimes.

When Emie shifted away from her, Julie let her go; knowing instinctively that the tall, dark-haired woman would pull away, ashamed at having broken down for even those few minutes.

"I have to get to the Command deck."

Emie's voice was slightly hoarse, but as steady as always. Julie just nodded and stood as well, smiling up at her, and surprising both of them by giving Emie a near bone-crushing hug.

"I'll get back to Southern Cross, the war games are going to start in a few hours. I love you."

Those simple three words seemed to calm the First Guardian and she hugged Julie back just as fiercely.

"I love you, too. Don't forget that."

"I won't, First Guardian, I won't. Don't leave me though."

"I swear."

Emily arched an eyebrow as she watched the maneuvers being displayed on the holo tank before her. The three dimensional display gave her a good understanding of what was happening near Earth's moon. It would have been even better had she dipped into the bond with her ship self, but she didn't need that level of detail. What was happening was fairly obvious.

The ID tags, which floated by each of the red and blue dots, told her which ships were where, and what their relative status was. Each of the dots, which floated out towards the edge of the tank had tags, which blinked, indicating that they had been "destroyed" by enemy fire. Each side had made errors, some of them costly, but the results of this engagement had been clear from early on.

Angwar nodded towards the tank, sporting a definite smirk.

"That's that then."

Emily folded her hands over her stomach, still watching the moving ID tags inside of the tank. She felt, not empty, but peaceful. The burning anger that had consumed her was, not gone, but muted. Banked and stored away. No longer threatening to consume her in a blaze of directionless rage.

"Hmm."

Nicholas and Darrien were standing nearby, Nicholas as always fidgeting as he watched, while Darrien stood, impassive as a mountain. Mira leaned forward and nodded, the old, white-haired Guardian nodding in agreement.

"He's right, First Guardian. Agressor team has them on the run. At best, Defense isn't going to be able to do more than inflict forty percent casualties. I think I like your Julie's way of doing things."

Emily glanced with amusement at the other Tiri Guardians. None of the older Guardians had taken part in the war games. This was a test of the human Guardians and their crews. Some of

which, such as the fighters, had only joined the various Battle Groups this morning. A few ships still didn't have their assigned fighters.

"That's your professional opinion is it?"

The three other Guardians grinned, well Darrien grunted, and nodded. Emily tried not to think about the cause of the sadness in Mira's eyes yet though, or the brittle edge her grin held.

"All right, looks like it's a consensus then. Angwar?"

"Yes, First Guardian?"

"My compliments to Julie and tell her that her force can stop beating the shit out of Zemjhi's Defenders. Tell them to regroup and switch sides. See what happens then."

"Yes, First Guardian."

If her Provost was smiling, Emily chose to ignore it. She'd been certain that she'd kept the pride out of her voice, but judging by the grins on the three other Guardians, she hadn't succeeded.

For someone who's always having problems with public displays of affection, Julie sure knew the right things to say this morning.

"Well then, if you three will stop grinning like fools and follow me, we'll get some work done."

The various Guardian Honor Guards thankfully stayed outside, since there wasn't enough space inside of her ready room for all of them. Darrien silently took his glass of vodka, while the rest of them stuck with wine.

It had been nearly sixty years since Emily had seen Mira, the smaller, older Guardian had held up fairly well though. Mira's ship self was one of the last remaining Variant Ten Guardian Ships, two generations older than Emily's ship self. It was smaller as well, but had the advantage that she had been one of the few Guardian ships to be specialized for scouting missions.

All four of them raised their glasses and saluted one another before drinking.

"Honor, Wisdom, and Strength."

Emily took her seat, sipping her wine as she watched the others. As was happening throughout the Imperial forces, Tiri were starting to act more alive than they had since the fall of Tiri Prime. They knew what was coming towards them, but by the Maker, at least they were doing something to fight the Bak'ra again. Being out of hiding had helped a lot, and seeing how well most of the humans had adapted had helped even more.

Not all of them though.

Emily reminded herself silently, thinking of the hot spots on Earth where she had been forced to deploy some of her, still precious few, Imperial Marines to keep the peace. Hatred died slowly, if at all, and she supposed it was inevitable that once the shock got over, that the Tiri would become targets of their own.

"How were things out there, Mira?"

The small elder woman shrugged elegantly, sipping once more from her glass of tea.

"Not great. The Zz'sstal fell shortly after we did. So did the Al'kar'kim, although it took a bit longer."

Emily grimaced at that. It had been expected of course, but that still didn't make it easier to hear the words. Both races had been close allies of the Tiri since the beginning of the war with the Bak'ra.

"I wish I could have kept in contact."

Emily waved that away, sighing.

"You know as well as I do that we couldn't risk any contact that would have brought the Bak'ra here before we were ready. I'm impressed that you managed to stay out for this long though. We feared you dead for a long time now."

Originally, Mira's orders had been to scout for as long as she could, then return. Emily had thought that would mean the other Guardian would return after a decade, at most.

"How did you survive out there, Mira? Sixty years is a long time to go without parts."

Her old teacher's face creased into a seldom seen smile at that question.

"We stumbled onto a group of refugees from Redwing, and got some parts from them about three decades ago now. Good thing too, since I was being hunted by an entire Bak'ra battle group at the time. I can't tell you how good it is to be back though, I was certain we'd never make it back more than once."

The sheer amount of information Mira had managed to collect on the Bak'ra movements and new ships were invaluable. The First Guardian only wished that Mira hadn't had to return alone.

"Your crew cleared yet?"

After the bio-engineered Bak'ra plague that had destroyed Tiri Prime and lost them the war, the protocols for dealing with even possible infectious agents were very strict indeed. The fact that Mira and her crew had been out scouting for so long and interacting with other species on the far side of the Galactic rim, didn't help at all either. There was a tension, a brittleness to her friend that hadn't been there when she'd last seen her.

Sixty years was a long time, even for a Tiri, and a lot had happened.

"Yes, they're ready to be rotated off soon now. I wish I could give them more shore leave though. At least I can reduce my crew numbers."

Emily watched her carefully at that, knowing the pain that lurked behind those simple words. Two Guardian-Class ships had been dispatched to scout, both of them Variant Ten's. They'd been a partnered team, Mira and Talia, for as long as Emily could remember. Even before she'd gone through her own Guardian Training, Mira and Talia had been together.

Darrien was watching Mira with a surprising look of tenderness on the old bear's face. Even Nicholas had stopped fidgeting.

"What happened to Talia, Mira?"

The white-haired Guardian's fingers tensed, curling around the glass she held until Emily was certain it would shatter. The stark pain in her voice cut through the First Guardian as Mira seemed to shrink in on herself.

"We were leading the Bak'ra on a wild goose chase. Trying to muddy the trail, keep them from heading this way. There were a lot of them, a couple of their big Thor-Class ships, and supporting elements. We jumped into the Vir system. The colony was still there, some of it anyway. Two thousand were left, Emie, two thousand."

The cold hatred in Emily's chest burned and she gritted her teeth. The Vir had been a prosperous Tiri colony, with a population of over a billion.

"They had a few old cargo ships, and were trying to get out of the system. Hard to do with no Guardians to form Jump Gate's for them. When we showed up they had all put themselves into stasis, aimed their ships at a destination, and gone to sleep. They must have been praying that they'd wake up to a better universe."

Mira stopped, closing her eyes and taking deep breaths. Darrien silently handed her his shot of Vodka and she downed it without question. The burning trail left by the liquid as it went down seemed to help a bit.

"We led the Bak'ra right to them, Emie. If we hadn't entered the system, the Bak'ra probably wouldn't have found them before they got out of the system. As it was... we couldn't stop. Talia knew that. By the Abyss, we *both* knew it. We tried though, we were going to grab onto them with tractors, open a Jump Gate and pull them through with us. Then the Bak'ra showed up, jumped in almost right on top of us. We fought, best we could, but there were so many, Emily. So very many of them, and they kept coming. Talia put herself between them and the cargo ships."

The endless pain in the old woman's gaze told Emily all she needed to know about what happened to Talia after she did that.

"They took the cargo ships, I couldn't do anything for them. Barely had enough energy to get my crew out of there. I picked up as many of Talia's crew as I could and got out of there. After that, we spent a good two decades being chased."

Emily wondered if she would have had the strength to leave and save her own crew if Julie had been killed. She doubted it.

"But we're here, and mostly in one piece. Not a moment too soon I think."

There was something nearly insane in the other woman's gaze, and Emily mourned the friend and teacher that had died somewhere in those sixty years. Grimly she nodded, knowing she could do nothing to help Mira. Not until she'd made certain that Earth didn't suffer the same fate as Tiri Prime.

"Thank you, Mira. When will *Banshee* be ready?"

That Mira had changed her ship self's name, told Emily a lot about her old friend.

"We can go as soon as we restock."

"Do your best, Mira."

"Take care, First Guardian."

Rising, Emily returned Mira's tired salute and watched her leave silently. Darrien and Nicholas let her sit back down and regroup her thoughts, which she was thankful for. Finally though, it was Darrien who broke the silence.

"*Banshee's* in shambles, Emie. I'm amazed she made it back in one piece. You can't seriously be thinking about letting her take up her place in the Line?"

Hard blue eyes met his and she tapped the data pad that lay on the desktop. Her smile was grim when she answered him.

"We have no choice, my friend. Rotate her crew and give her some rest, and supplies. That's about the best we can do for now. We need everyone and every last Guardian. Even Mira, and her ship self."

Nicholas for once had nothing to say, and simply sat where he was, shaking his head as if he didn't want to believe what he had heard, was hearing. Darrien was, as always, more stubborn.

"Emie, she's going to get herself killed. We have to leave her with the Human force."

Nicholas started nodding though at that, opening his mouth to agree.

The sound of Emily's hand slamming down on the desktop silenced them both.

"Shut up, both of you. This goes beyond her, beyond you, beyond even me. We are fighting to save an entire race. If risking her death means a better chance at saving Humankind, then that's what's going to happen. Understood?"

Both nodded, reluctantly, but they nodded.

"God Damn it!"

Julie stared at the holo display before them. She couldn't believe what she was watching.

"Webster, tell Captain Smith that if he doesn't get *The Saipan* back into formation, he's walking back to Earth."

The com officer nodded and swung back to his station. Julie hooked a thumb towards the holo tank and raised an eyebrow towards her Provost.

"What does Smith think he's doing?"

"At a guess, My Lady, he thinks he's going to show us how it's done."

Julie glared at her unrepentant Provost, who had taken to calling Julie, 'My Lady'. Her true anger was directed at the tank display though. *The Ranger* and *The Panteleyev* were holding formation with Southern Cross as her Battle Group tried to counter attack. The war games had been going on for almost forty hours now, driving both crew and Guardians to the limit. This was the second time she'd had to pull Smith back from charging ahead.

"Where is Aggressor Force?"

"Still holding formation and advancing, Ma'am. Looks like they're trying to flank us. I've got fighters being deployed now though."

Julie frowned and sank deeper into her ship bond. Skimming through the sensors, she pulled more detail about the fifty two Guardian Battle Groups which made up Aggressor Force. As, barely, the oldest human Guardian, Julie had been put in charge of the Defender Force for this set of games. She'd done well enough during the first set of games, where she'd led the then Aggressor Force to, as Emily had called it, Kicking Defender's ass.

Now though, both sides had learned a great deal from that first set, and they were much more cautious with their maneuvers.

North Star and the other Tiri Guardian groups were doing their own war game practices now, out by the asteroid belt. Julie really wished that Emie was nearby, but the First Guardian had wanted to be out with the Tiri Guardians while they trained with their new crews.

Odd, why isn't she having both groups train together? The Tiri Guardians didn't get any of the new support ships assigned to them either. Except for the three Heavy Cruisers that they brought with them on the Evacuation. What is Emie up to?

That line of thinking was side tracked as she noticed something in the formation she was looking at. With a slow smile she pulled out of the ship bond enough to focus on her command crew.

"Webster, raise the rest of Defender group. I think we've got a good chance of splitting Aggressor in half. We'll need to form a few Warp Gates though."

Glad to have an idea for a counter attack, Julie set to work, communicating with the rest of the Human Guardians directly.

Emily and the rest of the Tiri Guardians were making their way at a leisurely several hundred thousand kilometers an hour back towards Mars. They were only a few hours out from orbit, and Emily was looking forward to spending time with Julie. It had been a hectic few weeks, with the two of them only being able to catch a few minutes alone here and there.

I wish we could have stayed together, but everyone needed the practice. As is, things are going to be tough enough. I wish we had longer, dear Maker, I wish we had years to go...

Shaking the thoughts away, Emily sighed and thought of the conversation that she'd have to have with Julie tonight. Her lover was not going to like what she was going to say.

She's going to be pissed that I didn't tell her before. But damn it, it felt so good to just be with her.

The original plan had been to go out and meet the Bak'ra with the entire force at a nearby system, and neutralize the threat there. That plan had gone right out the airlock with the Bak'ra's earlier than expected approach.

We thought we would have years to prepare.

That had turned out to be truly optimistic view. Laric's treason was probably one of the reasons that the Bak'ra were advancing so quickly. The traitor Guardian had probably, somehow, managed to send out a signal. Whatever the reason, the results were going to be a bitch to deal with.

We won't be able to defeat them without Earth's defenses now. Maker help me, but we'll have to fight a falling back action. Make them pay for every kilometer they take.

Dark blue eyes flicked toward her command displays and she smiled faintly. At least more and more of the auxiliary craft were coming into service. Pilots were still scarce, but the Guardian ships were starting to finally get their full fighter compliments. Then there was how well

Southern Cross had done coordinating her forces. The section Julie had been in charge of had won their engagements, every time now. With less of a margin as the other Guardians caught up with her in way of training, but she won.

"Ma'am?"

"Yes, Angwar?"

"Southern Cross just signaled us, asks if we will be rendezvousing with the rest of the fleet at Mars?"

"Tell them we'll see them there in a few hours, Angwar. Alert the Emperor that we'll be starting Phase I as soon as we receive an indication of where the Bak'ra are."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Julie loved this. Laying in the darkness, curled up with Emily. They were in her quarters this time, the First Guardian having accepted her invitation to dinner. The smell of their lovemaking was still heavy in the air, and Julie could still feel the slick heat between her legs from where Emily had been a moment before.

"I still want you, how can that be?"

A low chuckle rumbled through the body she was still half covering and Julie sighed with pleasure.

"I want you too, little one."

That got a mock scowl though and Julie probed the First Guardian in a ticklish spot she'd found just an hour earlier. That earned her a laugh and a hasty apology.

"Ok, you're not little!"

"Darn right I'm not."

"Just a bit small."

"What?"

The resulting tickle and pillow fight removed the last of the covers and pillows from the bed, and they eventually curled back up together. The two of them breathing hard from having laughed so much, and loving the time spent together.

When Emily spoke, Julie wasn't ready for it.

"As soon as the long range sensor outposts spot the Bak'ra, we're going to go meet them, love."

Julie frowned slightly, wishing that her lover could have waited until the morning to talk business.

"I guessed as much, Emie."

Long fingers massaged her scalp and Julie let out a moan of approval.

"You and the other human Guardians are going to stay here."

That took her even longer to realize what the First Guardian meant.

"What?"

Shocked, she pulled away, sitting up so that she could see Emily's face and if she was sane or not. The calm blue eyes that returned her look answered that question.

"Emie, what are you talking about? We're all going, right?"

Even as a part of her suddenly understood why the Tiri Guardians had not practiced with the humans and the new support ships. Julie felt a sinking feeling as she felt Emily take her hand.

"Julie, there's no other way. We can't let the Bak'ra dictate which direction they are going to attack Earth from. We're going to go out and meet them. Let them think that the Tiri Guardians they know made it through the Evacuation are all there is. Then draw them back here, where you'll ambush them. Then we'll try and trap them between Earth's defenses and the rest of the fleet if we need to."

"No."

"Julie."

"NO! You are not going alone and leaving me here while you get yourself killed!"

"There's no other way. Julie, love, I wish there were."

"No. Emie, please, there has to be another way. I'll go with you, the others can stay here and wait."

"Julie, you know the Bak'ra know how many Guardians managed to survive the Evacuation. There would be no way that they would mistake Southern Cross as a Tiri ship. It would put the entire ambush in jeopardy."

Julie's heart wailed against it, and she wanted to scream at the calm figure next to her. It wasn't fair, they'd only just gotten to be together. Now Emie would have to go for God knew how long, and she wouldn't see her, or be able to talk with her.

And she might get killed, a part of her mind reminded her, not a part she was fond of at the moment.

"Emie, there has to be some other way. Please..."

Strong arms gathered her and pressed her against the First Guardian's chest. She clung to Emily, wanting to imprint the moment on her soul.

"Damn you for your timing Emie, I could have gotten really angry if I had more time."

Closing her eyes, Julie felt the small chuckle that brought, and the soft lips that pressed against her forehead.

"I know. You can yell at me when we're done."

Julie peered up at the face so close to hers.

"Promise me. Promise me I'll get the chance?"

"I will do my best, Julie, I promise."

The Imperial palace was much as Emily remembered it. She didn't visit it often, seldom having the chance with her duties on Earth, and her more recent duties as the head of Guardian Command.

It was much smaller than the palace on Tiri Prime had been, but it was still elegant. She appreciated the amount of work that had gone into it over the last half-century, and more. It just didn't feel like home to her.

"Daughter. It is good to see you again, healthy and happy."

Emily smiled as she took her father's hand and squeezed it carefully, before taking a seat.

"I'm glad I could attend the dinner tonight, Father. I just wish Julie could have also, but she's in the middle of another war game."

They were in one of the sitting rooms near the throne room, waiting for the other guests to assemble.

"Is Weston going to be coming?"

"Yes, he's even going to be bringing that pleasant Katya along with him."

Emily arched an eyebrow at that. The last she'd heard from Julie, Katya and her brother had still not been speaking to each other over some fight. Her father's eyes watched her with a knowing look, and the First Guardian ducked her head suddenly feeling embarrassed.

"Weston is as stubborn as you are, Emie, but he knows a good thing when he sees one. Whatever the argument they had, it was not worth the price. They should be here within the next little while."

"I know, Father." Thinking of a certain small redhead she'd almost lost due to her own stubbornness.

"What about you, Daughter? How is Ms. McGrath doing?"

The look of embarrassment turned into one of startle. Her father, *he looks so frail these days*, she thought, leaned forwards with amusement.

"You don't think I heard about your little fight?"

"Of course not, Father."

Although she had hoped that little lapse of her sanity had gone unnoticed by him.

"Daughter, there is no shame in anger and rage. The only shame is when it is not justified. I take it that you've learned that lesson finally?"

"I'm trying to, Father."

His skin was nearly transparent she noted as he patted her hand fondly, smiling as he did so.

"She is good for you, Emily. Weston likes her, and she's doing quite well with the other Guardians I hear. Trust your gut with this one."

"As the human saying goes, Father, you are preaching to the choir."

"Good, I had hoped I had not raised cowards for children."

The tone and amusement still shining in his old eyes took the sting out of that, not that Emily would have taken offense from her father. Well, not too much anyway.

"Who else is going to be here tonight?"

"A few of the Imperial Senators, who I think you should at least meet once."

"Father..."

"Daughter." His tone was one that cut through her objections, and one that any of her subordinates would have instantly recognized.

"You can't continue to try and completely avoid politics. You are my daughter, Imperial Princess Windstar, and it is your duty."

"Father, I am First Guardian, before all else. I don't have time for politics."

They both knew that for, if not a lie, then a half-truth. Before he could continue though, an Imperial Marine Colonel entered and bowed. A data pad held in his hand.

"Emperor, my apology, but I have a message for the First Guardian."

The laughter left their eyes at that, and Emily stood swiftly and silently. Taking the offered pad she nodded as he withdrew and pressed her thumb over the scanner, unscrambling the Class-One message. It only took a moment to read what was written and then meet her father's eyes.

"I guess your attempts to get me to be more political will have to wait, Father. An unmanned sensor platform just located the Bak'ra. They're seven Warp Jump's away. We'll meet them halfway and draw them in."

There was an old pain in the blue eyes which watched her, but her father nodded. He'd known what she had planned for some time now, and even if he did not like it, he knew she believed it would give them the best chance at survival.

"May the Maker bless you in this, my Daughter."

"May the Maker bless us all, Father."

"What you have to do is make certain that the enemy sees what you want them to see. Then you have a chance at getting them to take the bait and draw them right in. Then, ooohhhh, then they're in trouble."

~ Katya

Chapter Eleven

Thuva watched the Gallor-Tal carefully. The system ahead of them was a simple looking one, and sensors had not detected anything out of the ordinary, other than the object, which had attracted their attention in the first place of course.

"What do you see, Thuva?"

"Lord, I see a Tiri Imperial Sensor Platform."

"Indeed, Thuva, and what does that tell you?"

"We are getting closer."

Lortal smiled, as Thuva carefully kept her eyes downcast. Looking the Gallor-Tal in the eye was an easy way to become a sacrificial dinner.

"I agree, Thuva, we are getting closer. There have been sensor platforms in the last three systems. At long last we will place the last of them under the yoke."

"Yes, Lord."

The Gallor-Tal examined his subdued second in command critically. She had always been subdued, and he detected a note of almost sadness in her voice. His optical implant finished relaying the last of the warp gate formations, as the last few ships slid into formation. It was one of the largest Bak'ra fleets ever assembled, and Lortal felt a surge of pride that he had been chosen to lead it.

"You sound almost sad, Thuva."

She chose her words with infinite care. A slip here would as surely end her life as stepping into a fusion reactor.

"I will miss the hunt, My Lord. Once the Tiri are finished, who else shall we have to conquer?"

"There will always be someone else, Thuva. Always."

"There they are, Angwar. Right on schedule."

The command deck of the Guardian-class ship, North Star was eerily silent. Every one of her officers were watching the display screen that was set above the tactical holo tank. The horde of small red dots in the tank showed them more information than the display screen could, but somehow it seemed more real to see those ships on the display. It certainly seemed to mean more than a red dot with an ID code attached to it.

"How many do you think there are, Ma'am?"

That was her helmsman, a young man from Georgia if she remembered correctly. This was his first trip outside of the solar system, although the Tiri had recruited him long before they had made their presence known.

"A tad over four thousand of them, Nick."

The command deck, if anything, grew quieter.

"More than we expected, Emie."

The First Guardian shared a brief look of concern with her Provost before answering him. Making certain that her answer was loud enough to be heard by her other officers.

"Remember, our job is to lure them into following us. We're not attacking them directly. Besides, they don't have Guardians."

She tried her best to sound absolutely certain that they would succeed. Judging by the slight, but noticeable, lessening of tension on the deck, she'd succeeded. There were though, as Angwar had put it, a LOT of Bak'ra ships out there. More than she'd expected except in her worst-case scenarios. Four thousand of them, counting the ships that were what she'd call destroyer-sized and up, that wasn't even counting the fighters. The largest ship out there was just under four kilometers long, a full kilometer shorter than a Guardian-class ship. The Bak'ra had never cared much about size. *To them, sheer numbers matter. This better work, or we're going to be in a hell of a lot of trouble.*

"Sensors, any sign that they've detected us yet?"

"No, Ma'am, they are continuing on their original course."

She knew that of course, but it was best to follow protocol. People who knew what set conditions they could expect were people who could deal with stress better. Besides, keeping track of everything else on top of sensors was taxing for even the First Guardian.

The Expeditionary force, as the twenty-one Guardian ships, and three Heavy Cruises were almost jokingly called, had been in position for nearly a day before the Bak'ra fleet showed up. She wished she had more Guardians with her, desperately, but no use wishing for what she couldn't have. These were it, the only Guardians who had survived the evacuation from Tiri Prime. *There would have been twenty-two of us if that fucking lunatic Larac hadn't gone insane.*

Even that though was just a passing thought, upon which she didn't dwell for long.

Thank the Maker that I could at least fill our Fighter bays.

For the plan to work she couldn't let the enemy see any of the new capital ships that they'd built in Mars and Earth orbit. That didn't mean she couldn't fill up on fighters though. The Bak'ra would expect her to have at least gotten that much accomplished in her time on Earth. The same went with the full crew compliments.

Julie, I hope you're staying out of trouble, babe, 'cause I'm bringing enough home with me.

"Ma'am, I think they've finished their sweep of the system. The main elements are still on course, but their scouts are pulling back towards the main group of ships."

A quick look through her own sensors, and Emily nodded. That had taken them less time than she had thought it would. *They must only be doing a cursory scout of each of the systems. They know we're out here somewhere and they'll know it when they find us.*

The First Guardian's smile had nothing at all to do with happiness, and her Provost tried to suppress an urge to step away from her.

This time, we're waiting for you though. Come here, Kitty, Mama's got a big surprise for you.

The Bak'ra, if nothing else, were at least quite methodical.

"Com, tight beam communiqué to all ships. Make certain everyone understands that we go on my order, not a second sooner. All ships to battle stations."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Emily touched the small control panel on the side of her command couch. It was one of the few physical controls that the couch possessed. The shrill battle alarm snarled to life throughout North Star followed only moments later by the other Imperial vessels.

"Alright people, you all know what to do. Keep your cool, remember what you've been taught and you'll do fine."

The majority of her command crew was new, she'd had to promote anyone she could to captain the auxiliary ships, which had been commissioned. The fact that she knew it had been necessary didn't mean she had to like it. No one liked to go into battle with a mostly untried crew.

"You know, I really wish we had our old team here."

Emily smiled in return and winked at her Provost. Angwar was a good man, and she was glad she had him as a friend. Pitching her voice low enough so that only he would hear her, she nodded slightly.

"I know exactly what you mean."

He snorted and went back to his station, making certain that his crash harness was tight. Not that the harness or the fleet vac suites that they all wore would save them from a direct hit, but it would save them if all that happened was a loss of pressure.

"Guns, we'll want to engage the moment they enter our powered missile envelope. Rowen, the second we do, I want full acceleration away from here."

Her Chief Engineer and head of tactical had heard it all before with the rest of her command staff, but it didn't hurt to make certain they understood. It was going to be close, very close. It was important that the Bak'ra follow them on the path that Emily had decided upon. Otherwise they'd have little, if any, clue as to where the Bak'ra would attack from when they reached Sol.

"Ma'am, all Guardians report ready status for phase one."

The First Guardian nodded absently in acknowledgement. She was sinking deeper into her ship bond, letting her mind become one with North Star. Battle conditions were always tricky. Go too deep into the bond, and damage to the ship during battle could put a Guardian into shock. Not deep enough and the Guardian wouldn't have enough control of her ship self.

Emily closed her eyes and watched through her sensors. *Dear Maker, there are a lot of them.* The force heading towards her was an order of magnitude larger than the one she had brought with her.

"Stand ready, Guns."

The bridge was silent with tension; she could feel the single-minded dedication every one of her command staff was displaying. There was an imaginary sphere extending eight hundred thousand kilometers around the group of Guardians. Inside of that sphere any missiles that she fired would still be active and under power. Outside of it, a missile could still be used, but they would be traveling on built up momentum alone. She wanted to catch the Bak'ra force just as it crossed that envelope. If she waited longer the missiles would have a shorter flight time, increasing the chances of catching the Bak'ra unaware, but that would mean her force would be that much closer to the Bak'ra fleet.

Above all else her ships had to survive to draw the Bak'ra out.

The leading elements of the Bak'ra fleet crossed the imaginary sphere.

"Guns, fire plan Alpha. All ships commence firing."

Twenty-one Guardian ships, and three Heavy Cruisers fired as one. The ships had their broadsides towards the oncoming fleet, and each of the Guardians had forty missile tubes per broadside. It took time to reload those tubes, and while they were reloading, the ships spun on their central axis, flipping over to bring the other broadside to bear. Another forty missiles per ship launched five seconds after the first salvo had cleared the tubes.

That was it though; North Star and the others were accelerating even as they flipped to fire the second salvo. Emily watched in satisfaction as the Tiri Guardians began desperately accelerating away from the fleet they had just launched an attack against.

"Angwar, make certain all ships get good sensor records of the Bak'ra response."

"Yes, Ma'am."

The warp gate missiles themselves Emily watched speed towards their targets. Each of those missiles weighed in at slightly more than thirty metric tons. They were big; they had to be to fit in everything that they needed. Their powerful plasma drives accelerated the missiles so quickly that any human on them would have been turned to jelly. Even at the speeds they obtained, a fraction of light speed towards the end of their powered flight, it took the missiles several minutes to reach the Bak'ra fleet.

Time which the Bak'ra put to good use. Emily's lips curled slightly as she watched the fleet's formation shift. *No one ever said that the enemy had to be stupid, even if I wish they were.* The Bak'ra fleet changed formation, drawing closer together, interlocking their anti missile fields of fire.

Still they'd been caught by surprise; a missile launch, which must have seemed to come out of nowhere before they spotted the Tiri Guardian ships. Even as the Tiri sped away, Emily watched what happened behind them through her sensors. They had fired over seventeen hundred missiles in six seconds. All of those missiles had been targeted at just a handful of ships in the Bak'ra formation.

"There, see it, Angwar? They didn't quite pull their formation together fast enough."

Emily brushed a stray lock of black hair back out of her face and smiled savagely as the first of the missiles closed in. It could be seen on the holo tank of course, but Emily had a much better view through her ship's sensors. Either way, it was obvious what was happening behind them.

Counter missiles raced from the Bak'ra fleet, trying to destroy the incoming missiles. Dozens of the Tiri missiles, then hundreds, were blown apart before they got into range to attack. If the Bak'ra formation had been complete Emily was certain few of her missiles would have gotten through. But it wasn't.

Her smile widened as one, then a half dozen, then even more of the missiles they had fired made it into range. A warp gate missile had to get within five kilometers to attack. Once within that range though, the small fusion bottle contained in its middle would spin up to maximum power. The warp gate generator in the missile was powered up and formed, for a brief second, an unstable warp gate. It didn't last long; it didn't have to, not to do what it had been designed to.

The warp gate would tear apart anything that it encountered when it was formed. The gravitic drives all capital ships employed formed a shield ahead of the bow and behind the stern of the ships. The twin gravitic discs, which "pulled" and "pushed" the ship through space were powerful enough to shield the ship from frontal and rear attacks. They didn't stop attacks on the broadsides of the ship though. That was where the missiles tried to hit, some failed of course and hit the gravitic disks, but many more succeeded.

All told, Emily watched eighty-one missiles make it through everything the Bak'ra could throw at them. Those missiles hit only four separate targets, exploding mere kilometers from the flanks of the large ships they had targeted.

Three ships became the hearts of blazing explosions as their fusion power plants exploded. The fourth tumbled out of formation, its power systems failing, its hull shattered.

A cheer went up from the bridge and Emily eased out of her ship's bond smiling faintly as her command crew cheered. The sound was echoed across the other decks and on the other ships. The first blow had been struck.

"We got them, Ma'am."

She kept her voice quiet as she answered her Provost, her attention returning to the holo tank. The Bak'ra fleet was shifting its course, trying to chase after the Tiri ships. They had no hope of catching the Guardians before they opened warp gates and fled from the system, starting the five-jump sequence that would take them to the Solar System.

"We only got four of them, Angwar. Four ships out of four thousand. It's barely a bloody nose."

Julie yawned and groggily rolled up out of bed. It was early still, only 0500, five in the morning, ship time. She didn't have to be up for another two or three hours, but she was having trouble sleeping these days.

It had been two weeks since the Expeditionary force had set off from Sol. They hadn't been in contact since the moment that North Star and her brothers and sisters had passed through the sensor sphere. They couldn't risk a stray signal finding its way to the Bak'ra, especially the closer that the Expeditionary force got to its intended interception of the Bak'ra.

If they managed to intercept the Bak'ra that is.

Julie forced that thought from her mind. Her dreams were filled with a nameless dread.

"Come back to me, Emie, I miss you."

The dark quarters were silent and she sighed, getting up and putting on a robe against an imaginary chill in the air. It only took her a small brush with her ship bond to call up her quarter's lights, and make certain that they were still on course.

Two hours until we reach the coordinates.

Julie sighed and ran a hand through her short, red hair. She'd been getting less than five hours sleep every night since the Expeditionary force had set out. She didn't think any of them had been getting much sleep since then.

Ok, shower and then breakfast. Then I can go up to the Command Deck see how things are shaping up and maybe swing by Marine Country on my way. Make certain God has everything she needs.

The trick, Julie had realized, was to keep her mind occupied. To keep sorting through her sensor logs, to go through everything she had learned about Southern Cross and then go through it again. Even paperwork served to keep her from thinking too much about Emily. Even when she was working though, she'd be ambushed by memories of the First Guardian.

Night was the worst though. Then, laying in her bed, staring up at the plating above the bed, she had nothing to occupy her mind and it ran wild. Not knowing what was going on was hell. Julie wished she had something, anything to let her know that Emie was all right.

Come back to me, Emie, come back soon.

It had become her mantra these past few days, one that she repeated often.

An hour later she made her way down into what had become known as Marine Country, near the forward docking bays. Julie found Katya sparring in one of Southern Cross's rec rooms.

Wincing, the human Guardian took a seat and watched Katya finish beating up a rather large Marine with a particularly vicious kick/punch combo. God helped the other Marine up and laughed, pounding him on the back before heading towards where Julie was.

"Marines are weird."

God smiled and wiped her face with a towel as she left the sparring mat and headed towards the Guardian.

"Oh really, Julie, and why is that? Your Honor Guard knows you think they're weird?"

Julie ignored the second question, since she was quite certain that her Honor Guard thought she was insane.

"You beat each other up and then walk away friends."

The Russian laughed and took up a bottle of water, drinking from it before answering.

"Why's that so weird?"

"God, I don't particularly like people who beat me up."

"Oh come on, Julie, you went through basic and did self defense right?"

"That's different. I did that because I had to, you do it because you guys like it!"

They both smiled at that, and Katya wiggled her eyebrows.

"What can I say, I like pain?"

"Does Winston know that?"

Julie watched her friend carefully, wondering if the two of them had managed to sort out their differences yet. Considering the laugh that got, she wasn't really certain until Katya took a seat on the bench next to her and started unstrapping her gloves and helmet.

"That's your subtle way of asking if we're back together isn't it? Well we are, we fixed things, mostly anyway. Figured it would be best, you know, just incase something happened."

The smile faded and Julie nodded. A lot of people had been doing that. Small differences just didn't seem too important when you knew you might be dead soon.

"I came down to see if you needed anything else?"

Katya shook her head, standing as Julie did.

"Nope, we got the engines on the Drop Ship working, so we're back up to full compliment. If we need to, I can drop my entire Sword in one shot."

"Good, I hope we don't have to, but you never know."

The two wandered down the corridor, passing more training rooms and the firing range. Past two machine shops where Jump Troops were doing alterations on their Hard Suits.

"At least your people are keeping busy, Katya."

"We've got a lot to do to finish prepping. You wouldn't believe the number of glitches in the new equipment. We'll work it out though."

"Lovely, just lovely. Just don't put a hole in the side of my ship self ok?"

"Oh come on, American, would I do that?"

Julie laughed and headed towards the lift, leaving Katya at her quarters.

"Don't make me answer that, Katya, you don't want my answer!"

The Command Deck, when she reached it, was just coming off Delta shift. Returning the salutes of the on duty Marine guards, she smiled as she stepped inside. Her own Honor Guard remaining at the entrance.

"Guardian on deck!"

The crew on duty stood as she entered, until she waved them back down. It was still odd to realize that she was in direct command of all the thousands of crewmembers who were onboard Southern Cross. Odd and a bit-disconcerting if she thought about it for too long.

"As you were. Helm, time to the sensor sphere?"

"Our ETA is twenty three minutes, Ma'am."

Clarice showed up five minutes later. It didn't escape Julie that her Provost showed up on the same lift as her Chief Engineer. Lieutenant Sanders, if Julie wasn't mistaken, had been laughing. Something that she hadn't known the tall blond to do often since she'd met her. Julie raised an eyebrow as Clarice jauntily crossed the command deck towards her command station.

"You seem to be in a good mood today."

"I had a very nice breakfast."

Julie grinned and waited. The ex-Marine looked slightly uncomfortable but stared back almost defiantly.

"Should I even ask who you ate said breakfast with?"

Her Provost's eyes flicked towards the engineering station and Julie chuckled. Clarice stiffened and her features stiffened.

"Is there a problem, Guardian?"

"Dear God, of course not, Clarice. You do remember who it is that I'm dating right? Just don't let it interfere with your duties, Clarice."

Her Provost's body relaxed at that and she smiled.

"Thank you, Julie. I like her. I don't think she's ready for a relationship, but it's nice to have her as a friend."

"Well, good luck."

"Thanks, Ma'am, I think I'm going to need it."

"I think both of us are going to need that luck to get out of this one."

Julie settled down into her couch and let her connection with her ship self deepen just enough so that she could take over helm control.

"Here we go, time to cross the sensor sphere. Mr. Weber relay the status of Home Fleet to Mars and Earth. Inform them that we will be going to silent running in two minutes."

The newly arrived Com officer nodded and set about sending the signal before they passed through the sensor sphere.

"It's amazing, Clarice, they built this sphere of sensor stations without us ever knowing about it."

"It took them a long time to do it, Ma'am. I expect we'll be needing it pretty soon."

"I fear you're right on that one, Clarice. Make certain all stations are secured for silent running. We'll take up position just outside the sphere and wait for the Expeditionary Fleet."

"Yes, Ma'am."

The sensor sphere was made up of thousands of unmanned sensor platforms that the Tiri had placed in a sphere pattern that loosely enclosed everything inside of Mars orbit. Most of the sensor platforms themselves were hidden inside of the asteroid belt. It was with those sensors that the Tiri had prevented any of the human television and radio broadcasts from the last half-century from escaping the Solar System and potentially leading the Bak'ra to Earth.

It also was the largest linked sensor array ever constructed in the history of both worlds.

The plan called for the newly named Home Fleet, which composed of the hundred and ten human Guardian ships, and their support ships, to assemble for the ambush just outside of that sphere.

That was if Emily managed to lead the Bak'ra on the right course back to Earth.

"Don't worry, Ma'am, the First Guardian is very capable."

Julie looked up at her Provost in surprise. She hadn't known that her feelings had shown so clearly on her face.

"I know that, Clarice. It's just..."

She shrugged, how could she explain it to her Provost if she couldn't even explain it to herself?

"You worry about her. I understand, Ma'am. She'll come back though, don't worry."

"I miss her, Clarice. I miss her."

"Gallor-Tal, I don't understand what they are doing."

"Is it not obvious, Thuva? They are fleeing before us."

Thuva didn't quite think it was that obvious, but who was she to disagree with Lortal. Out right disagreement with the Gallor-Tal was not a good way to further one's carrier, or life expectancy for that matter.

"Perhaps that is not the only thing they are doing, Lord?"

The Gallor-Tal sighed, and finished chewing. His tone when he continued was the type one used when dealing with a particularly slow child.

"Thuva, I know that sometimes you have problems with tactics, but they are fleeing. They will attempt to distract us with those feints they continue to do, but eventually we will find their home system."

Thuva hesitated, taking a sip of her own soup before trying to phrase her next question.

"Does it not seem a bit too simple?"

"Thuva. Have we not driven the Tiri from their system and killed nearly all of their Guardians."

She hesitated at that, knowing where this was headed. Thuva had heard it twice now since the chase after the fleeing Tiri Guardians had commenced.

"Yes, Gallor-Tal."

"Have we not captured everything that was once theirs?"

"Yes, Gallor"Tal."

"Then tell me, Thuva, what difference does it make? In the end we will take care of them as we have all of the others. Is that all?"

His tone implied rather bad things if she continued with her current line of conversation; the results would be unpleasant.

"Yes, Gallor"Tal."

If she did not seem as certain as Lortal, he chose to ignore it. She was young after all; this was her first battle against the Tiri. She would learn soon enough that now the outcome was inevitable. The Tiri were homeless and they could not have done anything significant with the small number of them who escaped.

It never even occurred to him that they might have found allies.

Emily's mind burned with pain. Licking dry lips she forced her eyes to focus. Five jumps in the past two days had pushed her and her fellow Guardians to the limit. Flesh and machines were simply not designed to take the kind of stress she was forcing them to endure. It was a small miracle that everyone had managed to keep up so far.

Angwar and Dr. Miato, North Star's chief medic, were waiting for her when she came out of her bond. The hypo in his hand hissed as he pressed it to her neck.

"You can not keep doing this, First Guardian."

Emily took a deep breath as the command deck stopped spinning. Whatever he had given her stopped the pounding in her head as well.

"There is no other option, Doctor."

She ignored the worried looks from both of them as she swung her legs up over the side of the couch and managed to get into a sitting position.

"How are the others holding together?"

"Nicholas reports a fluctuation in his gravitic drive system after the last warp gate, but nothing serious. He says his speed has not been compromised."

The First Guardian wearily accepted the report that her Provost silently offered her. She scanned it and nodded, she already knew what was contained on the data pad.

"Good, make certain that the fleet continues at maximum acceleration until all ships are ready to form warp gates again."

Dr. Miato glared at her and she hid a sigh as he instantly objected.

"First Guardian that is simply not acceptable. That will only give you thirty-five minutes rest at most! You may not believe me, but forming warp gates is not an easy maneuver and is placing considerable stress on your body, both of them! Guardian Mira nearly suffered a stroke during this last warp gate. "

Emily ground her teeth and swung back towards the doctor, the glare in her eyes forcing him back a step.

"Believe me, Doctor, I understand the stresses involved. There is no other option though. By the Maker, we WILL continue on our course until we reach Earth, is that *understood*?"

Miato looked from the First Guardian to her Provost. He had the power to overrule her if it came down to it, on a medical basis. He'd need the Provost's help to do so though. Her Provost simply shook his head slightly though in response to the doctor's questioning look. The First Guardian did not miss the exchange and took a step towards the doctor.

"Doctor, I asked you, is that Understood?"

"Yes, First Guardian. I want the record to show that this goes against my recommendations though."

Her voice was a snarl when she answered.

"Acknowledged. Now is there anything else?"

"Make certain to come see me if there are any more headaches or blurred vision. I'll be back for your next warp gate."

With that he stalked off the command deck stiffly. Emily had to force herself not to snarl at his retreating back. Of course she understood the stresses involved! *I understand perfectly. The pompous little twit can't really understand what it takes to form a warp gate. No one who isn't a Guardian can.*

Her tactical officer looked up from his readings and cleared his throat.

"Ma'am, I've got multiple warp gate formations behind us."

"Range?"

"Five million clicks."

That was well outside of missile range, but it was closer than the Bak'ra had come out last time. They were catching up, slowly, but they were catching up.

"At this rate they'll catch up to us in another four jumps."

Emily smiled without any humor at her Provost and cautiously started to make her way towards her ready room. It would help if she could get some fluids into her before they had to make another jump.

"Good thing our next jump will bring us to Sol then, isn't it?"

She hoped everything was going to be all right when they returned. The Expeditionary Fleet had been gone for nearly three weeks now. They'd waited for the Bak'ra for two weeks before they had showed up in the system that Emily had decided to intercept them in. Then it had been a frantic pursuit across space, leapfrogging their way ever closer towards Earth. The Bak'ra only a step or two behind, always drawing closer with each jump, eventually they would catch up to the fleeing Tiri. Thankfully, they'd be at Earth long before then.

"I'll be back out before we have to warp gate again. Pass the word that when we do, we have to make positive that the Bak'ra are within a million kilometers from us. We want them to be occupied with destroying us when we reach Earth."

"Yes, First Guardian."

The command deck was silent when the doors slid shut behind the First Guardian. Angwar watched those doors with a worried frown before taking his station. No one had ever done so many jumps in so short a period of time. He'd heard that the other Guardians were not holding up as well as the First Guardian. He hoped that the Expeditionary Force would survive to reach Sol intact.

Chapter Twelve

Southern Cross hung in the darkness of space. Her hundred and nine brothers and sisters hung besides her. Between them, huddled around the larger Guardian ships like children, were the cruisers and destroyers. Once in a while, a squadron of fighters would cautiously move further out of the system on a scouting run then hurriedly they would return to their mother ships.

Their only connection with Earth and Mars were the cargo ships, which came and went every day. The large cargo ships would slip through the sensor net, coasting and silent. Unload their cargo of perishables, food, spare parts, and more recently graduated recruits. Then they would turn around, slide back through the net, and power up for the voyage back to Mars or even Luna.

For a week that was the routine. The newly formed human Home Fleet stayed silent. Everything that was non-essential was powered down as all of the ships did their best to imitate a hole in space.

Julie hoped it wouldn't last much longer. With their fusion power plants on standby, none of the ships could power up their gravitic drives, even if they wanted to. The human watched as a passing Ensign misjudged his trajectory and hit a bulkhead instead of going out the hatch. He grinned sheepishly at her stare and used his magnetic boots instead of floating.

No gravitic drives, no gravity on the ships. God, I really didn't want to learn all the fun that being without gravity meant. Taking a shower, or going to the bathroom for that matter, is really annoying.

Annoying wasn't quite the word she'd been searching for. Impossible worked well for taking a shower, and aggravating worked even better for going to the bathroom. There were just some things that were never meant to be done in Zero-G.

A week in Zero-G was starting to affect everyone, despite her Chief Medical Officer's best efforts. The body, as all astronauts had learned, was never meant to function without the constant pull of gravity. Muscles weekend, bone mass was lost. In some cases it became serious enough that people could hardly function at all when they returned to a normal gravity. Those however were the long-term effects; it was the short term Julie was worried about.

"Ma'am, we've had two more incidents."

At least, Julie hoped she wasn't going to have to worry about the long-term effects. *Emie, where are you?*

"What happened now, Clarice?"

"A weapons tech on deck five caused an airlock to cycle accidentally. He nearly caused a depressurization of the entire section. An engineer in life support vented twenty five liters of water before she could correct the mistake."

None of which were that worrisome on their own, but what would happen in battle?

"Thank you, Clarice. Alert the doctor that the amount of perception errors seems to be increasing."

As we knew they would.

"Yes, Ma'am."

Errors in perception were just one in a long string of things that started to happen. Back pains were another, as the disks between the vertebral columns expanded. Julie had actually managed to grow something like four centimeters.

Which is pretty much the only good point so far.

There were similar reports from the other ships; she'd read them all. A week was the longest that they had thought about spending time in what the Tiri called 'silent running'. Not particularly different from what the American and Russian subs used to do. Try to pretend nothing at all was there, and wait; lots of waiting.

Which gave her lots of time for thinking.

I miss touching her, tasting her. I miss holding her and just talking to her, even if she doesn't answer.

Julie stopped the next sigh before she could manage to sound like she was bored out of her mind. Which she was of course. Settling down into the couch, she had to use the shock straps to keep her actually on the couch itself, she let her mind wander. Replaying images of fine, dark hair, and piercing blue eyes; the sound of a voice that commanded thousands, even millions, but could make her shiver just with a word.

What will life be like if we survive this?

It was something she'd been wondering about more and more these past few days. What would happen if they actually won? Emily would stay as First Guardian, and what would that mean for Julie? She didn't bother trying to think about what would happen if Emie died and she survived. It wouldn't be living then, she was certain of that, it would just be existing.

Will we always be apart? Will I be going somewhere while she stays and deals with her responsibilities of being First Guardian? I don't think I can let her out of my sight after this stupid stunt of hers.

"Ma'am, I've got something on sensors."

Julie's eyes snapped open at that and she leaned over to get a good look at her sensor officer.

"What is it?"

"CIC is calling it multiple warp gate formations."

The tension, which had started to ease on the command deck over the past few days, ratcheted back up to record levels.

"Where?"

Another reason for Home Fleet's position, other than the cover that the sensor net gave to the constant stream of cargo ships, was its location near the OK limit. Inside of the limit warp gates could still be formed, but they could only be used to traverse "short" distances of a few light minutes. Anything greater and the Guardian ran the risk of the warp gate collapsing on her. Beyond the limit, the jump gates could be formed to cover much greater ranges.

"Ten million kilometers, on heading one five, mark two zero."

Everyone held their breaths as they waited. Julie strained, trying to force her ship self's sensors to read what was going on. It took what felt like an eternity for what was happening ten million kilometers away to reach them.

When it did, Julie nearly sobbed out loud in relief.

North Star slid through the first of the warp gates. The rest of the Expeditionary Fleet was right beside her, as the entire fleet jumped at the same time. Forming so many warp gates so close to one another at the same time was dangerous, but the Tiri Guardians managed it.

The formation of the warp gates lit up on their sensors like the birth of a star. Brilliant against the cold nothingness of space, and glowing just as warmly, to her sensors at least. It was beautiful, and no one who was not a Guardian could have appreciated the dance of gravity waves required for its formation. North Star was there, that was all she cared about for the moment though.

Thank you, thank you, Emie's back.

A second after the readings reached her sensors, she picked up the warp gates opening behind the Expeditionary Fleet. If the formation of the warp gates that signaled the arrival of Emily and the other Tiri Guardians was the birth of a star, these were its death.

Thousands of warp gates opening in a staggered formation, a bare four hundred thousand kilometers behind the Expeditionary Force. They arrived one after the other, not jumping all at once like the Tiri had. There were simply so many of them that they couldn't. Even as Julie watched, two warp gates touched on formation, and the ships trying to transit through it were sheered in two. There were so many of them that Julie winced in almost physical pain at the "brightness".

Someone on the Command Deck prayed, quietly. She heard one or two muffled curses.

They'd known what was coming their way. But hearing about what was going to arrive and seeing it were two different things.

Julie licked suddenly dry lips. The urge to try and call out to Emily was nearly overpowering. She desperately wanted to send a signal to the other Guardian, ask if she was alright. To hear her voice again. Instead she focused on what was coming towards them behind the First Guardian.

"Mr. Webster, signal all ships, tight band laser transmission. Prepare for battle."

Thuva frowned at the tactical display. Something was wrong, and the young Gallor-Tal couldn't figure out what. The way the Tiri were fleeing before them, drawing the Bak'ra ever deeper into this system. Surely they would have stopped to defend it if this was the system they had chosen to colonize?

Yet, if they did, why were sensors not picking up anything from the inner planets? Had they not built any of those orbital forts they always seemed to prefer?

She held her objections until the systems asteroid belt, located between the fourth and fifth planets, came into view. The Tiri Fleet, small as it was, had just begun to come into missile range. The first salvo of missile fire sailed across the void. At this range it would be a miracle if either side scored a hit. The Bak'ra had the missiles to spare though. She wondered if the Tiri did.

"Lord, do you not find this strange?"

Lortal turned to study his young student then smiled, not a particularly reassuring expression on the Gallor-Tal's face.

"Thuva, they are attempting to get deeper into the system where they doubtless will attempt to use their warp gates to better advantage. It does not matter, they will not survive the coming battle."

It made sense, sort of. The Tiri warp gate generators were far more efficient than their Bak'ra counterparts. They could function deep inside of a star's gravity well, where as the Bak'ra couldn't. The Tiri could only open warp gates for short distances, but it was still an advantage.

One, which her Lord seemed to believe they sought to exploit.

"Lord, I have no doubt that is true, but should we not see some sign of defensive emplacements? Somewhere? Yet there is nothing before us."

"Thuva, they simply did not build any. Do not forget they must not have been here for more than sixty standard cycles."

Thuva licked her lips, trying to marshal her objections.

"Lord, I know that is not long for us, but these Tiri seem to progress so much faster. Do you not think they would have built at least a sensor platform? We should be seeing something at least. Perhaps we should pause here and send scouts ahead?"

She knew the last was a mistake the second she said it. Stopping in the pursuit of fleeing cattle was tantamount to suggesting that they were all cowards; unfit for the hunt that was underway. Thuva bowed her head as Lortal's right optic sensor extended slightly. Two of the engineered personal guards hunched slightly, their disruptor nozzles aimed towards her.

"Thuva, you are young, and that is the only reason I will not feast on your flesh tonight. You will take a Claw of ground troops and proceed to secure the fourth planet."

That planet didn't even have an atmosphere capable of supporting sentient life. At least none that the Bak'ra had ever come across, it was the third planet that showed the most promise from this far out. Accepting her banishment, Thuva bowed and walked backwards away from her Lord.

She was lucky to be alive.

Julie bit her lower lip, watching the plot ahead of her intently. The Expeditionary Fleet was twenty minutes away and behind them, in missile range. The two fleets, if one could call them that, were beginning to exchange missile fire. For every missile that the Guardians sent back towards their pursuers, nearly forty would answer them.

It wasn't quite as hopeless as the numbers suggested though. Julie knew that Tiri technology was more advanced than the Bak'ra in electronic counter measures and missile technology. Still, she winced as missiles began to slip through the counter fire and detonate near the oncoming Guardians.

"Range?"

Clarice looked up from her station and answered, her voice steady and professional.

"Two million kilometers, Guardian."

Soon the Guardians would arch up "over" the waiting Home Fleet, and it would be their turn.

"Any sign they've spotted us or the sensor sphere?"

"None, Ma'am."

Julie knew that of course, but she'd learned from watching Emily that the best way to keep people from freezing up was to keep them occupied. There was no way she could handle all of Southern Cross's systems in the coming battle, but she could direct them. Her crew would have to make certain those systems kept working though.

"Ma'am! I've got ships breaking off from the Bak'ra fleet."

Julie had spotted it at the same moment as her sensor officer had. Through her ship self's sensors she watched as a handful of what looked like planetary assault ships broke away from the oncoming fleet.

Now where do you think you're going?

It was the work of a moment to plot their new course and project it onto the tactical holo tank.

"Mars."

Julie nodded in agreement with her Provost and watched the dotted lines of the projected course intercept the red planet's orbit. So, they'd decided to go ahead and land troops before the actual space battle even took place. That was a bit arrogant.

"Mr. Webster, com the other ships. Tell the stand by Marine forces to launch now. Stealth protocol until they're past the sensor sphere and then burn all the way to Mars. Clarice, tell Katya to go earn her pay check."

"You certain you want to do that? If the Bak'ra spot us..."

"They're going to need our help on Mars, Clarice. The Bak'ra are far enough away that the Drop Ships should be able to slip out unnoticed under stealth protocol."

Her Provost didn't look happy, but she went and relayed the orders. Julie just hoped she knew what she was doing.

Emie, I could really use being able to speak to you right now. I don't know what I'm doing.

"Fuck!"

Emily raised an eyebrow towards her Provost and watched Angwar wince in apology.

"There was always a possibility that they'd be arrogant enough to launch a planetary assault before engaging us, Angwar."

Still she understood his feelings, since she wanted to scream as well. Since screaming and pouting on her Command Deck just before a major battle didn't tend to work well, she stayed as calm as she could. Still her armrests creaked as she clutched them.

Julie, please launch your ready Marines. There must be something like a half million Bak'ra on those assault ships. Mars is going to need all the help we can send them.

"Helm, time until course change?"

"Fifteen minutes, Ma'am."

There was nothing that she could do now, so she concentrated on the holo tank and her link to her ship self. The Bak'ra had emerged closer than she had anticipated. They were still towards the edge of the missile envelope, but not by as much as she would have wished. More and more missiles were starting to make it closer to the fleeing Guardian ships.

Just a little bit longer, come on, just a little bit longer.

The Expeditionary Fleet had been incredibly lucky so far. Several ships had suffered minor damage; blown gravitic shield generators, minor damage to outer hull plating, that sort of thing, but nothing serious so far. The fleet had carefully kept at the edge of missile range for as long as they could. Still, the Bak'ra had closed the gap.

There wasn't much that the Expeditionary Fleet could do in the way of evasive maneuvers. Small shifts in course, hoping to force the Bak'ra to waste more missiles, but other than that, they depended on their counter missiles, and aft gravitic disks.

The sheer weight of Bak'ra fire was cutting the advantage that superior technology granted the Tiri. Even the still long range was not as much of a help as it could have been with that many missiles. It was only a matter of time.

The Medusa hurtled through space, writhing and dodging as much of the murderous fire as she could. The Type-Thirteen Variant Guardian ship was fully crewed, something that her Guardian appreciated a lot at the moment.

Nicholas was deep into his ship bond, coordinating the defenses with the other Guardians, when his world went insane.

A single warp gate missile had managed to slip past everything the Expeditionary Fleet could throw at it. Others made it through as well, but they detonated at the wrong angle, or wasted their energy on the thick drive disks. This one skimmed under the Heavy Cruiser, Ninia, and then detonated a mere kilometer away from Medusa's rear flank.

The missile's small fusion bottle drained itself in one massive burst, powering the small warp gate generator in the missile's nose. The unstable warp gate it created clawed at the Medusa's gravitic shields, like a dozen others at that moment.

This one slipped through.

A fluctuation, nothing more than a small power flux in the shield grid, and the generators "hiccupped", through that small gap the warp gate formed inside of Medusa. It was like a small black hole had opened in the ship itself.

Armored hull plating, meters thick, crumpled like tissue paper.

Decks twisted and shattered.

Compartments were ripped open and exposed to space.

Dozens of people died instantly, more were injured.

The warp gate opened almost directly on top of her aft engineering compartment.

Medusa's aft gravitic drive fluttered and died, exposing the entire rear of the ship to fire.

Nicholas screamed in agony as his ship self was torn. Decades of Guardian training allowed him to force his mind to work through the pain, shunting more power to the section. Trying desperately to reroute around the damage. Nothing; the aft disk remained dead. Without it, Medusa's acceleration was cut in half. Instead of being "pulled" and "pushed" through space, the ship was only being pulled now.

"Sharra!"

Alarm klaxons snarled throughout the Guardian ship. Despite the reigning confusion his Provost was by his side almost immediately.

"Yes, Guardian?"

Another missile slammed into the rear of the Medusa. Without the nearly impenetrable gravitic disk, she was a tempting target. He knew what was going to happen next.

"Sound general evacuation!"

Her eyes met his and he nodded slightly. The well-built woman licked her lips then nodded and passed on the order. Throughout the ship, crew raced for shuttles, fighters, escape pods. Anything that would get them off the suddenly sitting target.

"You should go, Sharra."

"My place is with you, Guardian."

"Nicholas, Sharra, my name is Nicholas, remember?"

He grinned at her, ignoring the blood running from his nose. For the first time since she'd become his Provost, since before the evacuation of Tiri Prime, Sharra smiled in return and nodded.

"Nicholas, then, what are your orders?"

"Get me North Star, Emily's going to want to speak with me."

Another missile and then a third hit, the Medusa was falling behind her sisters and brothers. Falling out of formation, a certain death sentence. He knew what Emily would want to do, and he also knew he couldn't let her.

The First Guardian stared at the holo tank as it showed what her sensors had already told her. She tasted bile as she silently desperately urged Medusa's gravitic drive to come back online. It didn't though, and she gritted her teeth. Battle chatter flowed around her, and she could clearly hear the relayed evacuation order. Shuttles and fighters began to launch, along with more and more escape pods, from the five-kilometer long Guardian ship.

More and more missiles were beginning to hit her friend's ship self. The Medusa simply couldn't keep up with the others, not with half her drives down. Emily could order the Expeditionary Fleet to slow their acceleration to match the Medusa of course. That would mean the Bak'ra would close on them that much faster though. There was a possibility though, if they used the tractor beams...

None of the rapid-fire thoughts and possibilities showed on her face though, as she directed the com signal from Medusa on to the main display screen. The image was a bit fuzzy, but Nicholas's smile was still readily visible.

"Emie, I've got a bit of a problem."

"Hold on, Nicholas, I'm going to get a few of the others to tractor you and pull you along with us."

"You know it's too late for that. I'm falling behind too fast. I've ordered the evacuation of everyone I can, the shuttles and fighters should have enough acceleration to catch up with you. Those in the escape pods will just have to hope the Bak'ra miss them."

The First Guardian's eyes blazed at that and she sat upright.

"Nicholas, don't be stupid. We'll tag you and drag you along with us. Now just hold tight."

His smile, for once was sad and he took the hand of his Provost. Emily blinked as they laced their fingers together, and Shara actually smiled.

"It's been an honor serving with you, Emie."

"Nicholas! Don't!"

"I'm sorry old friend. There's no other way, you know it."

Her sensors picked up another two missile hits. The entire aft kilometer and a half of Medusa was nothing more than a mangled piece of wreckage. The large Guardian ships were designed to take punishment, but this was above and beyond what they'd been expected to endure.

She swallowed against the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach and forced a small grin in return.

"I'll miss you."

"Give my love to Julie." The screen flickered and she saw a panel behind him explode. The image stabilized again, long enough for him to add, "listen to her, Emie, she's good for you." Then the image wavered and went dark.

She watched, silently raging, through her sensors as Medusa absorbed another missile hit. Her hull was shattered, her fusion generators ruined. The ship had simply taken too much. One moment she was there, the next her forward fusion plant went, and the ship turned into a small supernova.

Then, just like that, Nicholas was gone.

"Oh my God."

Someone, Julie wasn't sure who, whispered.

Every eye on the bridge was locked onto the main display as Medusa's final moments showed.

Julie thought about the people on board who were doubtlessly dead. The Guardian whom she'd met, and had made her laugh. Nicholas, he'd been in charge of the Tiri base near Australia.

If she'd been alone she would have thrown up. Cried, wailed and raged against the waste, the knowledge that more would die before this was over only added to that urge.

The small woman forced a shaky hand to run through her hair before speaking. Using the moment that action gave her to try and steady her voice. It was still wavering about the edges a bit, but steadier than she'd expected when she spoke.

"Time until Phase two commence?"

No one moved.

"Tactical, you heard the Guardian. Time until Phase two, and MOVE on it!"

Clarice's voice was a whiplash against the stunned confusion. People moved, jerked out of the moment, and Julie smiled shakily in thanks to her Provost.

"Five minutes."

Julie nodded and tried to clear her mind enough to sink deeper into the bond with her ship self.

It took her three tries.

"Webster, send the signal to the others. Tight beam, ready for Phase 2 on my mark only."

"Yes, Ma'am."

A part of her watched the looming Bak'ra fleet and hungered for revenge. An even larger part of her wished there was a way around it. Any way to avoid this senseless bloodshed and carnage, some of which she was going to cause.

"Marines are all away. It's even money as to whether they beat the Bak'ra to Mars or not though."

"At least they won't get through the sensor sphere before our little surprise, Clarice."

"I hope it works, Ma'am."

"You and me both, Clarice, you and me both."

She sank deeper into her ship bond, only half aware of her Provost moving away to take her own duty station as she did. The Imperial Fleet, which had seemed huge to her before, seemed like such a small thing compared to what was coming at them. Licking dry lips she watched missile after missile streak towards the oncoming Expeditionary Fleet. So few were thrown back at the Bak'ra, such a small number compared to what they were enduring.

"Expeditionary Fleet course change in ten seconds, Ma'am."

At least Tobias, her new Tactical officer, seemed to know what he was doing. Not like the last one.

"Mr. Webster, stand by to send the signal to the sensor sphere."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Five."

Last minute targeting changes were made on hundreds of Imperial ships.

"Four."

Prayers were muttered, wishes to see loved ones again were wished.

"Three."

Thousands wiped sweaty palms off on their uniforms, and thousands more wished they'd gone to the bathroom earlier.

"Two."

A First Guardian, and the first *human* Guardian, each whispered that they loved the other at the same time.

"One."

"Send the signal, Mr. Webster."

On North Star, Emily issued orders, and the entire Expeditionary Fleet shifted course. They angled "upwards" at an angle of ten degrees from the course they had held so far. Each of the surviving ships was injured, some more than others, but they had held together through the incessant missile fire. A cold bloodthirsty smile formed on her lips.

On the Bak'ra command vessel, Lortal blinked. The Tiri Fleet, which was fleeing before him, had suddenly, after so long, shifted course. There was no reason for it, none at all. The course change would only allow his ships to close even closer onto theirs. Then the universe went mad.

The sensor sphere had not only been designed to keep Earth's radio emissions from seeping out into space, it had been designed to transmit and receive as well. Now it did the later. Hundreds of stations that were near where the hidden Home Fleet powered up and started transmitting at maximum power. Each of them projected a decoy sensor ghost. To the Bak'ra, hundreds of ships had just appeared in a wide arch of space above them. The sensor ghosts weren't that good, and the Bak'ra computers pierced the deception almost instantly.

Almost.

In that one instant, the Home Fleet went from standby to active. Even as the Bak'ra computers were dealing with the flood of new information from the sensor ghosts, the human Guardians targeted and fired.

They'd had days to refine the firing plan, and an hour to carefully select targets. Those targets were only a few hundred thousand kilometers away now, and each of them was oblivious to their existence.

Emily's smile was savage as Phase Two swung into action.

"It's working, Angwar. By the Maker, it's working."

Her Provost shuddered at the battle lust in the First Guardian's voice, and mutely nodded in response. It was indeed working. As one, the Home Fleet opened fire with everything that they had. Missiles streaked out and detonated among ships that never even saw them coming. Plasma cannons fired at unprotected bellies.

What did the most damage though was the new gravitic weapons system each of the human Guardian ships carried.

"All hands brace for emergency deceleration!"

Southern Cross bucked and heaved as missiles struck around her. Her personal escorts, the two heavy cruisers and single destroyer did their best, but more and more energy weapons were hitting her shields. Still, that was nothing compared to what they'd just done.

A hundred and ten Guardian ships had opened fire as one. Their missiles and plasma cannons were only a sideshow though, compared to what the new gravitic weapons systems did. Each of the Guardians mounted one in their hammerhead-shaped bow, which was completely different than the smooth sleek bow of the Tiri Guardian ships.

The beams tore at the Bak'ra ships. Punching through the gravitic shielding on their flanks and into the ships themselves, then through the other side.

Julie tried not to think about what she was doing, not to focus on the lives she was ending.

"Full acceleration!"

The Home Fleet leapt forward, actually passing through the Bak'ra formation. In the years to come afterwards no one would be able to put together exactly what happened. Never before in Tiri history had two fleets actually physically passed through one another. The Home Fleet accelerated directly at the Bak'ra fleet, cutting a swath of dead and dying ships through it. Like a scalpel slicing through a large predator, they forced their way through the very center of the Bak'ra force. Right behind them were the ships of the Expeditionary Fleet, having reversed course.

They didn't escape unharmed, a dozen Guardian's died in the fight, but the combined fleet managed to break through the other side. Leaving a hole in the middle of the Bak'ra formation behind them. The two battered and nearly broken fleets raced away from each other. The

Imperial fleet slowly decelerated then once more changed course and took up the chase, after what was left of the Bak'ra, speeding towards Earth.

We hurt them, Emie.

There was no way that they could leave their ship selves while still chasing the Bak'ra, but Julie really wished she could hold the taller woman right now.

I know, hon, I wish I could hold you too.

Earth ready for them?

Maybe, Julie, but even if we did hurt them, we didn't stop them.

Emie, we destroyed hundreds of ships!

Julie, they have the ships to spare, we don't.

The redhead sighed and snuggled a bit deeper into her ready room bed.

Will Earth hold until we can reach them?

They have about an hour lead on us now, love. We'll just have to hope that the orbital forts do their job. Once we get closer, we can try to warp gate to catch up a bit, but for now we'll just trail them and do what repairs we can.

Julie smiled as the feeling of love and warmth spread through the link between the two Guardians.

Any word from Katya yet, Emie?

Sorry, Julie, the last I heard they were going to be touching down on Mars the same time as the Bak'ra land assault force. We've done the best we can for them. We have to worry about Earth now.

Julie could feel her love's fear and worry about her father and brother who were on Mars. She said a quick prayer for them all, hoping that they would survive what was coming towards them.

The sensation of phantom lips brushing against hers brought a small moan of pleasure.

I need you.

A sense of longing so powerful it nearly hurt filled the link.

I need you too, Julie. Get some rest. We'll need it when we reach Earth.

Promise me I'll have the chance to show you how much I've missed you?

Oh, I can definitely promise you that Ms. McGrath.

The Drop Shuttle was crowded with a full Dagger, ten people, in hard suits along with the shuttle's normal crew. They'd had to strip everything they could out of them, and strap on additional fuel tanks, to get them to reach Mars from where the Home Fleet had been positioned.

They'd make it.

Barely.

"Major, we're about to enter the atmosphere!"

The pilot was nervous. She didn't blame him; the Bak'ra had entered the atmosphere ten minutes earlier.

"Get us down close to Mars base!"

"I'll do my best, Major!"

The ship bucked as it slammed into the thin Martian atmosphere. Thin streaks of light wisped up over the thick armored view ports.

"Ma'am, got a read on the Bak'ra. They're touching down sixty clicks south of Mars Base."

Katya grunted in acknowledgement. That meant they were staying clear of the base's ground weapons. Probably getting sorted out before taking them. A cautious maneuver on the part of whoever was in charge over there. She added that to a small mental file.

The fighters came out of nowhere. The first they knew about it was when two Drop Ships turned into flaming tombs for the Marines onboard them. Then another two, and four more afterwards, ten were gone before the fighters scrambled from Mars Base managed to reach them.

Katya was ready to shoot someone to get the hell out of that Drop Ship. If she was on the ground she could see who was shooting at her, usually anyway, and do something about it. Up here she didn't even have the illusion of being in control. Here she was strapped down and at the mercy of the pilot's skills.

So she was very happy when they pulled out of their descent two kilometers above the surface of Mars and her command Dagger jumped. The Drop Ship went into a short, and brief glide, as the pilot killed her anti-gravity drives for her people to jump. Since getting put through a meat

grinder was a pleasant experience compared to going under an active anti-gravity drive, Katya was rather glad about that too.

"God, we've got a problem."

The voice of her XO, a good man from Mexico, Andresson, came over her suits com system.

"What's that?"

They were still a good kilometer up, when she hit her suits anti gravity pod. It was a brute thing, and it kicked like a mule.

"General Gagner was in that last Drop Ship."

"Shit, what about Major Arkin?"

"Didn't make it."

"Well crap."

"That puts you in charge, Major."

"Thanks, Andresson, that's just what I wanted to hear."

In the end it all comes down to a few people whose actions will echo throughout history.

~ Guardian Julie McGrath.

Chapter Thirteen

The two fleet's of ships spat fire at one another as they hurtled through the empty darkness between planets. They swept through the asteroid belt that separated the fourth and fifth planets of the solar system, carelessly blowing apart any of the lifeless chunks of rock that strayed too close.

The first fleet was made of ships, which almost looked organic in shape, and there were a lot of them, nearly four thousand. There had been a few hundred more only hours before, but the smaller fleet had thinned the ranks somewhat. Now they raced through the system, trying to be the first to reach the small blue planet that hung in the empty void before them.

A small inconsequential thing it looked against the vastness of the galaxy.

Nothing very special to look at, just another planet, even if it did have the blue of water, and the promise of an atmosphere capable of supporting life.

It did, however, have one thing that separated it from the rest.

Something that made it worthwhile to fight over, to defend, to die for.

Life.

Julie chocked on smoke, coughing as she slammed the helmet of her pressure suit closed. The suit would clear the smoke from its internal air, and almost immediately she could breath easier.

"Damage?"

Her Provost looked up from her display, already wearing her own pressure suit.

"Missile four's gone, and we've got a hull breach on deck ten and eleven. Damage control teams are en route."

Julie scowled at the tactical display; she should have seen this one coming. None of them had though. The near ambush by the Bak'ra had almost worked, would have if the Sensor Sphere hadn't given them the critical few minutes warning that they needed.

"Ma'am, North Star is signaling us, wants a damage report."

"Send Emie the report and let her know that we're still ship shape Mr. Webster."

Julie's attention was still focused on the sensor readings through her ship self. *Cunning bastards, they tried to get us with our plan. Too bad our sensors were keeping track of them.*

The Bak'ra had tried to leave fifty ships behind them, powered down, as their main force kept on course towards Earth. Presumably they had wanted the fifty ships to get close enough to the Tiri ships to do the same thing that the Tiri had done to them scant hours before. Thankfully the Sensor Sphere had been keeping a close track of all of the Bak'ra ships, and despite there attempts at shifting positions to confuse the sensor tracks, CIC had kept a good track of how many ships were ahead of them. When fifty Bak'ra ships suddenly disappeared the alarms had sounded.

"Ma'am, The Kiev is reporting heavy damage to their starboard side. Fifty dead, a hundred or so wounded. Captain Panteleyev says that they'll do their best to remain in formation."

Even knowing that they were there, the fifty Bak'ra ships had managed to inflict damage before the Imperial Forces could destroy them. Southern Cross had taken a bit of minor damage, but her Heavy Cruiser consort had not been as lucky.

"Tell Captain Panteleyev that if necessary he can drop from formation and try to reach Mars base. Alert the Ranger and The Saipan to the damage sustained by the Kiev, and make certain they know that they may have to take over Guardian support from her."

"Yes Ma'am."

She'd be damned if she relied on The Ranger's captain for support, but it didn't look like she'd have much of a choice in the matter. Julie had bigger problems to keep her occupied at the moment, like trying to stay alive long enough to stop the Bak'ra from reaching earth.

The Bak'ra fleet, wounded perhaps, but still six times the size of the combined Tiri fleet, was racing towards the center of the system. Reports were still coming in from Mars, although what little Julie had heard was not encouraging. The Bak'ra ground assault forces had landed just over an hour ago. The red headed Guardian spared a good wish for

"Southern Cross reports minor damage Ma'am."

Thank the Maker.

Outwardly all that the First Guardian did was nod in acknowledgment. As long as Julie was still in one piece she could focus on her main problem. Namely the huge fleet that was between her and Earth and destroying them before the Bak'ra did to Earth what they had done to Tiri prime.

"Time until Earth orbit?"

"Three hours twenty minutes."

Not enough time. There just wasn't enough time to stop them before the ships reached high Earth orbit, before they entered effective missile range of the planet. Then it would be the job of the newly installed, and even more recently tested, planetary shield and orbital fort network to hold them off. To prevent them from doing to Earth what they had done to Tiri prime. There wasn't much chance of them holding for long though, they all knew that. Despite the best efforts of Tiri and Human those forts were vulnerable. They couldn't dodge, they couldn't evade incoming fire, if they moved more than a few hundred meters from the spots they'd been chosen the massive network of the planetary shield would falter, and then fail in the localized area where the fort was.

Which meant a section roughly five hundred thousand square kilometers.

If a Bak'ra missile with a biological warfare warhead got through...

Emily tiredly rubbed her temple, trying not to think about the carnage that would ensue. She already knew the casualties they'd be facing if something like that happened over an inhabited area. Millions dead if it happened over Europe, billions if it happened over China or India.

We just have to make certain it doesn't happen.

Easier said than done.

Her thoughts brushed across the kilometers of space and she smiled at the instant joy she found at the other end.

You all right Julie?

Yeah, just a bit rattled Emie, they move fast!

Deadly fast, watch yourself love, we're going to have to hit them once they get into Earth orbit.

There was silence for a second.

We can't stop them short of it?

Even though she was speaking through the link to the younger Guardian through her ship self, the tall black haired woman shook her head.

No, not and have a hope of stopping them. We hurt them, we hurt them good, but we didn't take enough of them to make it a sure thing.

Emie, any word from Mars?

None.

Both could taste the First Guardians worry over that. Her father and brother were both at Mars base, and nothing had been heard from the planet since the Bak'ra ground assault force had reached it several hours ago now. The red head's next words served to lighten Emily's thoughts though.

Be careful First Guardian, I need you.

Her lips curled into a small grin and Emily could hear the faint chuckle coming from her Provost's station, that she was blushing slightly probably made it easy for him to figure out what she was doing.

I will baby, stay safe.

"SHIT!"

The missile exploded ten feet from where Katya's hastily installed command post. It was little more than a small crater on the martian landscape, probably older than humans, she thought bitterly. It was the fourth in as many hours, and she hunched against the force of the explosion, the hard suit she wore taking the brunt of it.

"Medic!"

The scream went up before the explosion had even dissipated, and Katya forced herself not to look. She'd seen nearly twenty percent of her command decimated by the last few hours of desperate combat, and she just couldn't take the sight of another shattered piece of twisted metal that used to be a friend.

"Lieutenant!"

Even as the medics labored on the newest casualty, she could hear the thin steady screaming of the injured man through her com link before she switched channel, her second in command pounded up.

Her last second in command had been blown apart the first time they'd moved her command post, she still had his blood stains on her suit. Andresson had been a good man, he had a family, three children back in Mexico... Firmly the Russian ignored those thoughts.

"You see this ridge here, we'll draw them to it. How many of those nukes we got left?"

The hesitation was clear.

"Nuke's ma'am?"

"Just answer the damn question, how many?"

In the distance, less than a kilometer ahead of her position, marines were desperately pouring down a torrent of fire at the nightmare like creatures swarming across the surface of Mars.

"Three Ma'am."

"Good, put them in a line along the southern edge of this ridge. Move."

The two-meter hard suit whirred as he moved away from her, and she spared a glance at her own suits read outs. She had another six hours of power left, as long as she didn't start firing the plasma canon mounted over her suits right shoulder. Most of the rest of her people were in a worse situation though, close fighting drained power like no body's business. The loss of the supply shuttles were hurting them, and she wondered how long it would be before people started having to toss away their hard suits due to lack of power cells.

Another missile streaked overhead and she watched grimly as it slammed into the rear of her lines. The few heavy tanks that she had left were returning fire, but they were being overwhelmed. They were making the Bak'ra pay for it in blood, but they were being driven back towards Mars Base. What had started out as a comfortable hundred kilometer buffer zone was down to less than half that.

The Bak'ra for their part had to be seen to be believed.

They reminded God of nothing so much as three meter tall armored spiders with canons on there back and missile launchers slung under them.

Yeah, armored spiders that can jump a hundred feet in this low gravity and move over eighty kilometers and hour. No wonder the Tiri developed these hard suits, we'd already be dead otherwise.

Not that the end result looked to be any better, but she grinned savagely. She'd see as many of them burning in hell before they reached Mars Dome as she could.

"Father, we have to get you out of here."

The Tiri Emperor sat in a command seat near the back of the massive Command and Control installation buried underneath what had become known as Mars Dome. It had taken the Tiri sixty years to build that dome, a place for there civilians to live, and a place where they could recreate a little of the world that they had lost. The usually teeming streets were empty now, the last of those civilians had long ago gone to the emergency shelters built into the solid mars bedrock in anticipation of this day.

No one had anticipated the Bak'ra getting this close without Tiri ships being able to stop them though. The militia and marine's who had been stationed inside the dome were already waiting outside, nearly all of them in unpowered armor, with only pulse rifles, to aid the jump troops who were being driven back. Winston knew that Katya was out there, somewhere, if she wasn't already dead. He didn't think she was though, no that one was too stubborn to die.

Stubborn like someone else he knew come to think of it.

The old man in front of him had once seemed like the pinnacle of strength to a then young imperial prince. Now his father seemed a ghost of his former self, thin hands shook when he moved them, and his eyes often seemed to be focused on something distant.

Not now though.

"No, I stay here."

"Father, we need to get you somewhere safe."

"Son, I saw one planet overrun by these butchers, I will not run away and see it happen to another! Our people are here, and here I stay."

Winston opened his mouth to tell his father that they needed him alive when a dull explosion caused the room to shudder. All eyes turned towards the main holo tank, and Winston's words died in his throat. The Bak'ra were within ten kilometers of the dome now, and they were within range to start blasting the ground above with high explosives.

It was only a matter of time now.

"Son."

A trembling hand touched his and Winston looked back to his father in concern. The Royal guard, a dozen of the finest Tiri marine's to be found anywhere, stood nearby, all prepared to give their lives for the emperor.

"I can not leave our people."

Winston held his father's gaze, those eyes the same blue as his own and Emily's. He hoped his sister was still alive, they hadn't had a report from the fleet since the Bak'ra had landed and started jamming nearly all transmissions.

"Very well father."

Turning he headed for the door, glancing at the monitors as he went and noting where the Marine's on the surface where being pushed back.

"Where are you going son?"

Winston smiled at that, stepping into one of the lifts at the far side of the room.

"Katya's up there somewhere father, if you won't leave then neither will I. I know how to use a hard suit, figured it's time to go find out where that bride to be of mine is."

The doors slid shut on an understanding look from the Emperor. Who then bowed his head and prayed that he was not about to loose both of his surviving children to a war that had started half a galaxy away.

General Charles Starnhorse, late of the North American Aerospace Defense Command, also known as NORAD, ground his teeth on his unlit cigar, glaring at the holo tank that filled the center of the command deck. The swarm of angry amber dots that were approaching didn't sway at all under his regard and he snorted. He'd been in charge of the Betty, as the crew had nick named Orbital Fort 1, for a little under four months now.

This was the first time his command was going to come under attack. There had been endless simulations of course, training with the Navy, mock attacks, sudden drills, the whole kit and kibutal. Which didn't mean much in the chaos of an actual battle. He knew what the First Guardian's plan was, hell he even knew they didn't have any choice, that didn't mean he had to like it.

"Fool of a woman."

He growled, low enough that Colonel Elzhan Mordetti, a Tiri and a woman, didn't hear him from her nearby station. It wasn't that he didn't like his second in command, it's just that, well, damn it, she was a woman and the General was from an era that had accepted the fact that woman were to be shielded from the horrors of combat unquestioningly.

The transition had not gone what he would call smoothly.

There had been more than a few sparring matches which had resulted in everything from bruises to broken bones.

He'd sported a few bruises of his own during the past few months.

"Who's going to be hit first?"

Elzhan, finished typing in commands, and looked up from her console.

"They'll hit over southeast Asia first."

The General chomped on his cigar, and settled in to his seat. He had a bad feeling about what was coming down on his people. No matter what they were going to hold the planetary shield, but they were going to bleed to do it.

North Star shuddered, the massive five-kilometer long ship shaking as Bak'ra warp missiles clawed at her shields. The tall black haired woman in the command couch gritted her teeth against the pain. Being a Guardian allowed her to bond to her ship self and control it's direction and attacks at the speed of thought, but that bond carried it's own price.

Pain flowed through her as her ship self suffered damage. It was minor so far, and the tall woman easily shunted it aside.

From experience she knew it would only get worse.

For now though she was worried about the humans, the new Guardians. So far the over a hundred strong fleet of Guardians were holding together. That was only through a constant web of communications though and she worried about what was going to happen when they reach earth. So far she'd had to personally reach out and calm the others a half dozen times, and they were still a half hour away from the fleet in front of them.

The first ships of which had just reached high earth orbit.

They're hitting southeast asia , oh my god Emie, look at all that.

Emily knew exactly what Julie meant. Through their sensors the Guardians, and their crews, watched as fire crawled along the planetary shield. Thousands of missiles slammed against the

shield, probing, seeking for an opening. The planetary shield was a sphere of energy in low earth orbit stretched between the orbital forts. No matter how large the Bak'ra fleet was only a few forts could target them at any one time, while the curve of the earth blocked the others. Allowing the Bak'ra to concentrate their fire on a relatively small section of the planet.

Not all of the Bak'ra ships were trying to punch a hole through the shield though, a good half of the fleet hung back, waiting to intercept the oncoming Tiri and Human ships.

Julie.

The First Guardian's thoughts reached out through the distance between the Guardian Ships.

Stay safe my beautiful one.

On the command deck of Southern Cross, Julie closed her eyes and smiled. She could almost feel the brush of the tall black haired woman's fingers caressing her cheek. For those precious few seconds all that existed was the First Guardian and herself. Feelings flowed through the link between Guardian ships, between human and Tiri. It blazed brightly and throughout the small fleet both new human guardians and the few Tiri guardians still alive watched in amazement.

It was something old that link, and yet new, fresh and passionate. It burned brightly against the darkness to the Guardians who watched through their sensors. That link, the bond between those two woman, meant completely different things to the Tiri and Humans though.

To the Tiri, who valued actions above words, it was a joyous symbol of hope against the carnage that they had, and soon would again face. To the humans it was a symbol of their place in this new order that some of them were still struggling to feel comfortable in. No matter what they thought of it though, it drew them together, taking them that final step to becoming more than just individuals representing nations, to representatives of the human race.

Swallowing against the sudden flare of emotions Emily opened her eyes and shook her head slightly. It was amazing what the small blonde human could do to her. Only seconds had passed, it felt like much longer though.

"First Guardian, are you alright?"

Emily smiled at the worried expression on her Provost's face.

"Just fine Angwar, just fine. Why?"

"Your systems just had some strange readings, and then so did Southern Cross's, as well as nearly every Guardian ship in the fleet."

Emily's smile widened.

"It's alright Angwar, for once I think it's going to be alright."

If her Provost's look was still troubled, Emily didn't pay attention. Her lanky body was thrumming with power from the interchange with Julie, and amazingly she could sense the same from the others.

Queries, first from her friends, Darrien the first of them, then slowly from the human Guardians. Feeling the touch of Julie's feelings still fresh in her mind Emily gathered them all.

It was something that had never happened before.

In the entire history of the Tiri what was happening had never been seen before.

It started with Julie and Emily, but it spread quickly outwards from there, linking Guardian to Guardian in a web of thoughts.

For the first time in the history of Guardians the hundred and nine surviving Guardians were as one. Julie had but to think it, and the Guardian ships reacted, they were her sword and she wielded them ruthlessly as the Tiri fleet, after thirty long agonizing minutes finally came into range of the Bak'ra. After a half hour of being able to do nothing other than watch the Bak'ra attack their planet, they were able to do something about it.

Julie's thoughts were a whisper, but Emily heard them clearly none the less, as did everyone else in the web.

I love you Emily.

Not caring that everyone could hear her as well, Emily's response was immediate.

I love you too.

Then there was no time for anything other than the swirling chaos of missiles as the two fleets traded fire.

It was impossible.

Lortal stared at the information being displayed before him in a sort of morbid fascination.

Those weren't Tiri ships attacking his, they had to be demon spawn!

The Tiri ships moved in perfect coordination, weathering a storm of fire from the Bak'ra ships that should have turned a fleet twice their size into wreckage. True there were a lot of missiles getting through, and even as he watched more and more of the smaller Tiri ships were being blown apart, but the Guardians kept on coming. They were coming straight in, and his fleet was in real danger of actually being pinned against the bulk of the Planet below.

"Gallor-Tal, a message from Thuva, they are preparing to enter the base located on the fourth planet."

Lortal waved a cybernetic enhanced hand in acknowledgement. He didn't particularly care what happened on that red planet, the real battle was taking place here. He was about to order the fleet to break contact with the planet when sensors beeped, and his optical sensor narrowed.

"To all ships, concentrate fire here!"

Finally, a weakness, he would still send them all to the furnace, and the Bak'ra would feed upon their enemies once more.

General Charles Starnhorse clutched at the arms of his command chair, cursing under his breath. The five hundred million ton orbital fort shook as another missile hammered her shields. Unlike ships, which had a dense gravitic disk in front and behind them to pull and push a ship through space, the forts only had a weaker shielding system which surrounded them. The entire base of the vaguely mushroom shaped fort was taken up with the massive shield emitters which kept the planetary shields functioning.

Emitters which were currently redlined.

Elzhan yelled out over the screaming of a fellow officer, a piece of shrapnel from an exploding panel had taken the man's arm neatly off just below the shoulder.

"Fusion generators at 110% output!"

The General ground his teeth on the ever present cigar. Just his luck that out of all the forts in orbit his would be the one that the Bak'ra fleet had singled out for special treatment. Even with the Navy trying to destroy them the Bak'ra fleet was stubbornly holding position above them.

The fort shivered as more missiles clawed at it and warning buzzers snarled.

Crimson warning lights blossomed across the master status control panel and Elzhan's face went white. The female Colonel looked up and met his eyes, her voice was rock steady though.

"General, we've just lost fusion two."

He understood the problem, had the moment the warning lights had blazed to life.

With only one of the fort's two fusion generators working they only had half the power they needed. Which meant he had the option of keeping the fort's own shields up, or his section of the planetary shield.

He was over northern Europe, there were millions of people below, the decision wasn't a hard one to make.

"Transfer all power to the planetary shield emitters."

Elzhan met his eyes in perfect understanding and saluted a small smile playing around her lips.

"Sorry I won't get to meet your partner Elzhan."

That had been a source of contention between him and his second in command since the beginning. The Tiri might not care what a person's sexual orientation was, but damn it, he did. Well, he had. It just didn't seem very important at the moment.

Elzhan's smile was surprised, but real.

"She would have liked to meet you General."

Elzhan's partner as he remembered, gripping the chair again as the fort shuddered under fresh explosions, was assigned to the base on Governor's island. For Elzhan he was glad she wasn't here. More warning lights sprang to life as missiles, and then energy weapons began hitting the exposed armor plating of the fort itself.

The Betty started shedding armor plating.

The firing started as the Tiri fleet entered active missile attack range eight hundred thousand kilometers away from the Bak'ra. For ten minutes the Tiri fleet writhed under the return fire, heading straight down the throats of the Bak'ra. The smaller ships suffered, they tried their best to cover the Guardians, to protect them from the murderous fire, but there were simply too many incoming missiles and too few destroyers and cruisers. A human Guardian was the first to go, followed by a second, then a third. By the end of the ten minutes eighteen Guardians, and twice that number of smaller ships had been blown apart. Thousands of crew had died, and there were holes in the Tiri formation, high earth orbit was littered with debris and bodies. Not a single ship was undamaged, and many were bleeding atmosphere and trailing debris.

Hold your course.

Emily's thoughts echoed through the link between Guardians.

The Antwerp blew apart, her Guardian from Belgium, and a person that Julie had talked to quite a few times.

Hold your course.

Emily's words held them steady.

Even as one of Julie's escorts, the Panteleyev, commanded by Captain Kugar blew apart in a fiery explosion, the damage she'd suffered too much for the smaller ship. Julie tried not to think about the hundreds of people who had just died in that explosion.

Steady.

The Saint Louis, Marcus's ship self erupted in fire. The Guardian ship's front gravitic disc faltered and failed, and the entire hammerhead bow of the Guardian Ship ruptured, exploding outwards. Her old housemate's ship self flailed out of formation, and Julie's sensors showed massive power fluctuations throughout the wounded ship. Tears were leaking easily down her cheeks despite her resolution not to cry. Her own command deck was tense, everyone huddled over their stations, few believing that survival was even an option anymore.

Just a little bit more.

Through the link Emily "heard" Mary's cry of pain as warp gate missiles snaked past the ex-hacker's shields and crushed outer decks like so much cardboard. Fire's raged inside the guardian ship.

Almost there, almost there.

Like every other Guardian, Emily focused on the First Guardian's thoughts. Striving to ignore the pain that flowed through her link with her ship self. She had minor damage in dozens of places. She hadn't suffered any major damage since the start of the desperate attack though, and she was starting to hope that she'd manage to get into energy weapon range without suffering any major damage.

A warp gate missile managed to get past everything that her two surviving escorts and her own anti-missile batteries could through up. It slid to within only a few dozen kilometers, point blank range in space combat, and detonated. The Bak'ra missiles were behind their Tiri counterpart's technology wise, but that didn't mean they didn't pack a punch. The fusion bottle inside the hundred-ton missile spun up, and the small warp gate generator in its nose activated.

The warp gate it formed was unstable, but it didn't have to last long to cause damage. The end of the mini wormhole opened inside of Southern Cross and the massive ship bucked as it formed. Armored decking and bulkheads were shredded. It opened just aft of Southern Cross's aft fire control center. Dozens of people died instantly, their bodies shredded at the molecular level.

The after effects were even worse though.

Explosions rippled through the damaged area, and only the specialized armored compartments kept the fires from spreading. Damage control teams started working immediately, but the entire aft half of Southern Cross's missile launchers were suddenly cut from the battle net. Their operators immediately started firing independently, but as long as they were cut from the net their fire control was degraded, and half of the missiles which Southern Cross fired were of little use.

Julie screamed, the pain was almost physical as she felt the damage done to her ship self. A good portion of the training she'd gone through to become a Guardian had been about functioning through the inevitable pain that being so deep in her link with her ship self during combat would bring. The red head had never thought it would be so difficult though and her concentration wavered.

Julie.

Her name was infused with love, and it helped her force the pain away.

That's it love.

The First Guardian was suffering as well, a good portion of her starboard flank was nothing but shattered wreckage, but she was used to working through the pain. Julie clung to her words, focusing on them and driving back the pain until she could focus on her ship self. The pain receded until she could once more concentrate and she managed to reroute fire control, once more all her surviving missile launchers were in the net and firing together at specific targets in the mass of ships before them.

Then, finally, they were in Energy weapons range, and Julie could feel Emily's savage grin. The First Guardian had waited for this moment since the fall of Tiri Prime, and her savage dark energy flowed to all of the Guardians in the net. The barrage of enemy missiles had battered them, but now they were in range.

Orbital Fort One was burning.

They could all see it through their sensors, see the pieces of armor that were blown off it's surface, the glowing craters where weapons had gouged deep into the fort. The return fire from the fort was becoming less and less, and it was only a matter of time now.

Her crew stayed though. Staying at their stations, and somehow, by some miracle, holding their section of the Planetary shield together. The other nearby forts did their best, trying to distract the Bak'ra but they were too far away.

The massive fort was dying, and as Julie watched, her power output levels fluctuated, and the planetary shield flickered dangerously.

They'd done their job though. They'd held for long enough, and the Tiri ships, finally, after losing more than two dozen Guardians, and even more smaller ships, were in energy weapon range.

Julie's smile had nothing of humor to it.

It was little more than a barring of her teeth.

If the rest of the Guardians were a sword, then she was it's tip. North Star plunged into energy range and her plasma canons opened fire. At this range and with so many targets in front of her, there was little chance of missing. The canons were devastating, overloading Bak'ra shield generators, and then punching holes in armor whose thickness was measured in meters.

"Shieri, Now."

At her fighter commander's signal fighters in the surviving Tiri fleet launched from their hanger bays. The Guardian class ships each held almost a hundred of the small fragile craft, while the cruisers held an even dozen each. All told there were almost ten thousand fighters that launched in the space of a few short seconds. They were fragile, that was true, and if they lacked the missiles to be decisive in a long distance engagement, they were built for this sort of close in fighting.

With the clouds of fighters surrounding them the Tiri ships once more sliced into the Bak'ra formation. Forcing those ships that had been firing on the dying fort to turn their attention on the oncoming Tiri.

All human Guardians, target Gravitic lance.

Eighty surviving Guardians powered up the massive weaponry that was built into the hammerhead bow of their ship selves.

Pick your targets.

Sensors locked onto the largest ships they could find.

Ready.

The range crept down, the Bak'ra ships were returning energy weapon fire now as well, more and more ships were simply disintegrating in fireballs. Dogfights between the larger Bak'ra fighters and the Imperial fighters whirled through space in a deadly dance.

Fire.

The Bak'ra hadn't known what had hit them at the Asteroid belt.

They knew now though.

Knew what those terrible weapons were, and that they were fired by the new Guardian class ships.

And the knowledge didn't save them.

Nearly a hundred of the largest Bak'ra ships, five kilometers of warship each, vomited fire. If the Plasma Canons were effective at this range, the Gravitic Lance was like the first of god coming

down. Each one punched straight through the weaker side shields of the large ships, through battle steel, ripping through the center of the ships, and then out the other side.

Emily directed it all.

The Fighter's weren't under her direct control, but the Guardians were, and she wielded them ruthlessly. The buried anger and need for vengeance flowed through her, released from it's sixty year long imprisonment, infusing the others, even Julie lost herself to it and the battle became a blur.

Then the Betty exploded, her remaining battered fusion generator simply giving up. The explosion destroyed the lower half of the orbital fort, turning the night time sky over Europe into daylight for a few brief seconds.

The planetary shielding where the Betty had stood died.

Katya had ditched her hard suit ten minutes ago when she'd run out of the last of her power cells. It didn't really matter anymore, the Bak'ra were inside of the dome now, and in some ways it was better to be fighting in unpowered armor. Winston was with her, and she shared a tired smile with the Imperial prince. They were fighting building to building now, bleeding the Bak'ra with every step, but they were still being forced backwards.

She had no clue how many of her original command still were alive, but she hoped it was more than she thought. At least the Bak'ra seemed intent on taking the dome intact and not using nuclear weapons to blow them to kingdom come.

Ducking behind the rubble of what had once been a nice set of apartment God patted her plasma carbine fondly. The weapon had been a gift from the American Guardian to replace the one she'd lost in Plattsburgh. She wondered how Julie was doing, she hoped that the red head was still alive.

"They'll be fine, my sisters a tough one to kill."

Winston whispered, then nodded towards the lurking forms of yet more Bak'ra cyborgs. The massive spider like creatures weren't as maneuverable here inside the city, a fact that the militia and remaining marine's were putting to good use. Only one of the prince's royal guard was still alive, and he had a pretty bad shoulder wound, but he was still keeping an eye on their backs for them.

God grinned wickedly and lined up another shot with Winston spotting for her.

If she had to go, this was the way she wanted it.

Mira's hands shook as she gripped the arms of her command couch.

The small variant ten Guardian ship bucked as yet another Bak'ra energy weapon sliced through her shields and ripped open a gash along the side of her hull. She was bleeding air in a dozen places, her primary fusion reactor was off line, half her crew was dead or injured and life support was failing on a dozen decks.

Truth be told the old Guardian was surprised to still be alive.

Other Guardian ships were desperately blowing apart Bak'ra ships as they got into ranges that were suicidal, less than a hundred kilometers in some instances. It was sheer madness, even out at the Asteroids they hadn't interspersed this closely. Ship's fired broadsides at each other at such low ranges that explosions from their targets buffeted them.

There was one Bak'ra ship though that was getting through everything they could throw at it. It was a big one, and Mira realized with a start that she was the nearest to it. Another few seconds and it would get a clear shot at the vulnerable planet beneath, and she knew, perhaps better than most, what those biological warheads could do.

She ignored Julie's sudden command to stop as the First Guardian figured out what she was going to do. Abandon ship alarms came to life in those parts of her ship self where they still worked, but few of her crew heeded them. Most of them had lost everything to the Bak'ra and none of them wanted to run away from this fight.

Not a single member of her command staff moved, and she met the eyes of her Provost with a peaceful smile. He returned it with a quirked grin of his own, his partner had died with Talia, and he calmly returned his attention to his station.

She was old, her ship self had been made nearly two centuries before, and was four Variant's out of date now.

That didn't mean she wasn't fast though.

The small Guardian ship arched up and under an exploding Bak'ra ship, slipped between two smaller Bak'ra escorts, blasting them to the abyss as she passed, and then dove towards her target.

Lortal smiled in victory.

His fleet might be decimated, but with the death of that orbital fort, finally, he had a shot.

Biological warfare missiles replaced warp gate missiles in his ship's missile launchers and he savored the split second before launch. The plague that he was about to unleash upon this pitiful planet would do the same thing to it that he'd done to Tiri prime. Then he would just gather what

was left of his fleet, escape from the system, and let the plague do it's job. By the time the Bak'ra had another fleet ready there would be no one left to fight them.

He reached out towards the fire command, and mentally blinked in surprise.

The Tiri ship had come out of nowhere, and it moved faster than he would have thought possible.

He had time for one last thought.

Thuva was right, they were up to something.

Then the three kilometer's of steel and battle armor slammed into his command ship.

Emily screamed in rage.

Julie felt the First Guardians despair and anger wash over her, and through the link to the other Guardians as Mira's ship self, *The Banshee*, physically rammed the Bak'ra ship. There was a lot of momentum in a Guardian ship, and the bow of *The Banshee* crumpled as it slammed into the broadside of the Bak'ra ship. For a long endless second the two ships plunged downwards, interlocked with each other, entering the upper edges of the atmosphere, their edges beginning to glow red from the friction.

Then they exploded.

For the second time that night the sky over Europe turned into noon.

Thousands were blinded by the bright flash, and every active electrical circuit for hundreds of kilometers was fried by the sudden massive electro magnetic pulse.

But not a single Bak'ra missile made it to detonate above the surface of the planet.

The destruction of their command ship was too much, too many other ships had been destroyed, chains of command were in tatters, and the still formidable Bak'ra fleet ceased to act as a cohesive unit. Ships fought alone, without the support of there companions.

The Tiri and Human Guardians, still linked together, began cutting a swath of death and destruction through them, fueled by the deadly anger radiating by the First Guardian at their center.

In the end maybe eighty Bak'ra ships survived to escape. The Sensor sphere out past Mars kept track of them as far as Pluto, then the survivors formed warp gates and were gone from the Solar System.

Chapter Fourteen

The lights were on low in the large suite of rooms. Just enough to see by, since it was a cloudy night outside, and there was no moonlight. Two figures lay curled up together on the king sized bed that adorned the master bedroom. A trail of clothes led to it, starting at the front door, passing through the living room, past the fireplace, straying near the bathroom with its Jacuzzi tub, and then to the foot of the bed.

The scent of lovemaking was heavy in the air, and the quilt from the bed had been tossed to the floor sometime during the past few hours. The two woman had a single thin sheet drawn up over them, but they were still warm, from earlier, and shared body heat.

It was quiet in the bedroom, unlike earlier, as the two rested together. Taking comfort in holding the other close, and easily offering comfort to one another with frequent caresses and embraces. The smaller of the two woman, the redhead stretched, luxuriating in the feel of the cool sheets and the warm body she was pressed up against. A low chuckle caused her to turn and nip at exposed skin, smiling.

"What are you sounding so pleased with?"

The taller woman's voice was just as husky as her smaller companion's when she spoke, and just as happy.

"I'm feeling well loved."

The red head curled up closer, laying her head on the black haired woman's chest, one leg thrown over her companions.

"You should be, we've been at it for..."

Emily smiled, pressing a kiss to fine red hairs, a brief brush with the link to her ship self gave her the time and her smile widened.

"All night, dawn's just a few hours away."

Julie smiled in pure joy and tried to burrow closer.

"Good, I've missed this."

Long arms tightened about her and she heard the chuckle resound through the First Guardian's chest where her ear was pressed.

"So have I love."

It had been two months since the Bak'ra had been defeated.

Two months of mourning for the hundreds of thousands who had died to protect the planet and the human race. Two months of beginning to rebuild, and sorting out the mess on Mars.

Two months which had seen a new Emperor crowned, and the solidification of the first real world government.

"I forgot to tell you, since you pounced me the second we got here, but Katya says hello."

Julie lightly pinched her bed mate, drawing an outraged squawk.

"I didn't pounce you, you seduced me!"

"Oh really?"

The tone was dry and Julie propped herself up a bit to see Emily's deep blue eyes.

"Yes."

Green eyes sparkled.

"How did I do that?"

"You looked at me."

Blue eyes danced with mischief.

"I looked at you huh?"

"Oh yes, so it's all your fault."

They both chuckled and Julie laid back down in what was quickly becoming her favorite position.

"How's she doing?"

"Better, Winston's even got her to set a date for the wedding."

Julie's eyebrows raised a bit at that, her Russian friend had been hemming and hawing over when to have the wedding for the past month. It had been close for Katya, she'd taken a Bak'ra energy bolt to the chest just before the frantically dispatched reserves from Earth had arrived. A few millimeters to the left and the bolt would have killed her, Winston had been nearly insane with worry.

Then the Emperor had been discovered dead on his throne, having died from a massive stroke sometime during the end of the fighting inside of mars dome.

The victory over the Bak'ra had been bitter sweet and for the first few nights with Emily, Julie had held the First Guardian as she cried. They both woke up with nightmares these days of the fighting, of dead friends, but it was bearable when they were together. Which, Julie hoped,

would be a lot more frequently now. Things were starting to return to a semblance of normal, and the frantic struggles of the past two months were starting to fade.

"How's Mary doing?"

Emily shrugged, causing Julie to grin as she felt the movement.

"The repairs to her ship self are going to take another four months at least, but she's actually starting to get through to that captured Bak'ra."

They'd captured what they were starting to understand was a Bak'ra leader at Mars dome. The woman, well Julie supposed it was a woman under all those cybernetics, had been found seriously injured by the Imperial Marine's who had arrived from Earth.

Emily had wanted to kill the Bak'ra immediately.

Julie had stood up to her and told the First Guardian how valuable it would be to actually figure out how the Bak'ra thought.

It had been a tense few minutes, on the command deck of North Star. The two had glared at each other, while Angwar and the rest of the First Guardian's command staff had tried to pretend they were somewhere, anywhere else.

The anticipated explosion had never come though, and Emily had smiled slowly. Telling Julie that if she thought she could figure out what to do with the Bak'ra then fine, she could deal with the thing, but if Emily heard it had caused any problems at all Emily would personally see that it was disposed of.

Julie had smiled sweetly and immediately put Mary in charge of the Bak'ra prisoner.

Something that had so far turned out fairly well with the young Guardian from Maine managing to learn bits and pieces from their prisoner. It wasn't easy, the Bak'ra mindset was completely different than anything that humans or Tiri were familiar with, but there was some progress.

That and, as Julie had told the still somewhat miffed First Guardian, it kept Mary out of trouble. Which they both agreed was worth a bit of risk, considering what the ex-hacker was capable of now that she was a full Guardian.

Emie traced a path with her fingertips up the smaller woman's back. Julie sighed with pleasure, but kept up her questioning.

"That's not what I meant. How's she doing with our guest?"

Long elegant fingers suddenly tickled her and Julie yelped in surprise, reaching back and capturing the offending fingers, laughing.

"No changing the subject First Guardian, how's she doing?"

Emily shook her head, causing black bangs to drift over her forehead. Julie experimentally let go of the tall woman's fingers, and when she wasn't tickled again, she tenderly brushed the black hairs back.

"She's doing fine, as you very well know. I still think we should put a pulsar dart in that thing's head..."

"Woman."

Emily scowled.

"Thing's head, but we are learning something about them."

"Can I say I told you so?"

"Depends."

Julie grinned and moved up the lanky body, pressing light kisses to the warm skin below her.

"On?"

Emily groaned and tangled her fingers in short red hair, losing track of the conversation, something she found she did often around the charming human.

"Wha?"

"What does it depend on?"

Warm lips covered her nipple and she arched her back, managing barely to form an intelligent answer.

"Only if you keep that up."

Green eyes met blue with a promise.

"Always."

Lips met sealing the promise as two souls cemented a joining that had weathered more than most were every called upon to do already. The future stretched out before them shining with endless possibilities and the simple knowledge that whatever it brought they would face it.

Together.

The End.
