

THE FOUNDATION
PART TEN
INVASION: PART FOUR
BY
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When the flashes cleared from Mindstar's eyes, he could see that he had landed on some sort of off-white flooring, not the floor in the training room. It had a slightly rough feel to it, like the non-skid coating the Navy used on their ships. The chorus of groans and moans assured him that the rest of the Guardians had made it through the magical teleportation, although none appeared to have enjoyed it.

No one, that is, except Firemane. "That was majorly cool," she said.

"About as cool as open-heart surgery," Strongarm groaned. "I guess we're here."

"Can it," Mindstar breathed. "Somebody's close." He glanced around. They were in a short connecting corridor, hopefully near the command deck. He'd hoped that they would appear in Terry's cell, but that was evidently too much to hope for with that long of a teleport. He should be happy that they ended up in the ship at all.

Moving to the wall near the longer corridor in front of him, Mindstar felt the mind approach. The person approached to the edge of the corridor and stopped. Mindstar motioned the rest of the team to be quiet; the mind was highly alert and edgy. The touch felt somewhat familiar, but he didn't scan very deeply: he needed to be able to act quickly when required. Finally, the mind moved forward.

Mindstar opened his eyes to see the target and unleash a mental attack when he stopped. A broad-shouldered, dark-skinned back confronted him. He gasped, which was enough sound to make Tony turn around. "Mindstar?" Tony whispered in surprise, remembering enough to keep his voice down.

Mindstar motioned him into the corridor. "How did you get loose?"

"Loose electrical conduit," he said. "They evidently turned the cameras off. How did you get here?"

"The hard way," Mindstar said. "Where are the others?"

“I only know about Dr. Stone and Sarah,” he said. “I left them in a closet a few corridors back while I looked for a way to the life pods. They’ve done something to Sarah that’s compromised her powers and weakened her severely.”

Mindstar nodded. “How much do you know about the ship’s layout?”

“Only what I learned from some of the diagrams I’ve seen,” Tony said. “The bridge and command deck is back the way I came. Engineering is down that way. We’re in a central connecting corridor. I thought the life pods might be near here. Besides, I haven’t seen much traffic at all.”

Mindstar nodded. “Okay. Crimson, get moving. We’ll get Sarah ready to move and then continue.”

Crimson Knight nodded. “Let’s go.” He took his team and moved down the corridor behind Mindstar, moving away from the direction Tony had come from.

“Lead us to Sarah and Dr. Stone,” Mindstar said. Tony nodded and turned back into the corridor, back the way he had come. Mindstar, Strongarm and Firemane followed closely behind him.

Tony took a convoluted route. He turned several times, appearing as if he had doubled-back. Mindstar noticed that he had been working a spiral route out, in order to find the nearest exterior area in the shortest time.

Carpenter jabbed the command key for the public address in the room Pain and Rampage were using as a ‘ready room.’ He did not cut in the video; he didn’t want to be distracted by whatever they might be doing. “Pain, Rampage, the Guardians have boarded the ship. They have split into two groups. Pain, take your people and get to command. Rampage, get to engineering. I believe they are heading for those areas.” Carpenter cut off the audio pickup before he could hear more than the first harsh syllables of the curses he knew were flying.

Tony stopped beside an apparently normal door, no different than the dozen or so they had passed before now. He pointed to a small x scratched into the surface. Mindstar nodded. Tony pressed his hand to the control pad. The door slid upward into the ceiling.

Mindstar silenced Stone a second before he could scream. “Quiet,” he said. “We haven’t seen anyone, but that doesn’t mean you can just yell.”

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Stone said, panting with relief and built-up tension. “We need to get Sarah to a medical facility immediately.”

“No can do,” Mindstar said, “but I did bring some help.” He stood up, allowing Firemane to get close to the girl. Sarah was laying flat on the floor of the closet; her skin was flushed and dry, and her breathing shallow. Firemane stretched out her hand and began to chant the words of the healing spell.

“Wait just a minute,” Stone said, “I said *medical* attention, not...” He trailed off as a bluish glow formed between Firemane’s hand and Sarah’s chest. The bluish glow spread across the girl’s nude form, her skin glowing a cool blue. Firemane closed her hand and the glow faded, replaced by a normal skin tone.

Sarah opened her eyes. “Kat?” she asked, seeing Firemane. “Where’s Tony?”

“Right here,” she said. “Come on, you need to get up.”

“Hold on,” she said, blushing slightly at her nudity. She closed her eyes, concentrating on her powers. Bluish light began to glow around her body as the moisture in the air concentrated and cooled at her mental command. When she opened her eyes, panting with the effort, she had managed to construct an almost-opaque bikini top and bottom for herself.

“Better than nothing,” she panted.

Firemane winked. “Good work, girl.”

“Tony,” Mindstar said. “Continue on your idea. Get Sarah and Dr. Stone to a life pod and get out of here. We’ve still got a mission to complete.”

“We can help,” Sarah said. “I owe them plenty.”

“You’ve done more than enough,” Mindstar said. “Instead of five hostages, they’re down to two.” Three, he corrected himself, but he doubted that even Beytraskans could be that inhuman. “You three broke out of captivity on your own and were making a good escape of it. Now finish what you started. We’ll pay them back enough for all of us.”

Tony nodded and motioned to Sarah and Stone. Sarah almost wanted to protest, but she acquiesced to Mindstar’s glare. Stone wanted to babble, but he thought better of it and followed meekly.

“Now what?” Strongarm said. “Our guide just went that way.”

Mindstar reached out. This close, his link with Terry was strong enough to tell direction and relative distance. “This way.”

Crimson Knight led his team down the corridor. So far, he hadn’t seen another soul. That scared him. In his time with the army, he’d been on board navy troopships from

time to time. There were always people moving about, at any hour of the day or night. He knew they were onboard a space ship, but he'd expected the same principle to apply. Obviously, either it didn't, or someone was clearing the way. Since he wasn't expecting any inside help, he didn't like the second thought much either.

He heard pounding feet behind him. He turned to scold the others when he realized that they were stopped, watching him. Techno was still watching their back trail, and he was pressed flat against the wall.

He glanced at Mind Mistress, who nodded. *Stay alert*, he thought. Mind Mistress relayed the thought to the rest of the team, who moved into position. Wraith moved across from Techno, also standing against the wall, and Aria and Wind Shear dropped into fighting stances behind him; that left Crimson Knight and Mind Mistress watching their original route.

Rampage, Banzai, and Metalite came storming out of a side corridor. "Damn it," Rampage snarled. "You idiots! They're between us and engineering."

"Thanks for the info, Rampage," Crimson Knight called. "Guardians, Epsilon."

"Rampage, attack," Rampage bellowed as he charged forward. Crimson Knight stepped forward to meet his charge head-on. The impact resounded like a bell being struck, and both combatants stepped back.

"You can't blast in here," Rampage snarled. "You're mine."

"Right on one, at least," Crimson Knight said as he dropped into a fighting stance. "I can still beat you hand to hand."

Wraith stepped up to take Banzai's charge. Wraith began spinning in place, keeping his fists pointing outward. The double punch to the nose brought Banzai up short and he staggered back. "That was a coward's attack," he said.

"I've got a score to settle with you," Wraith snarled, "any way is a good way." He stepped forward into the attack.

"That leaves us," Techno said to Metalite. He extended foot-long gleaming spurs from his gauntlets. "Let's party, hombre."

"Blades, against me?" Metalite sneered. He reached out toward Techno, but was forced to jump back as Techno slashed at him before he could do anything.

"Ceramics," Techno sneered. "You thought I'd be loco enough to bring steel up against you?"

“No matter,” Metalite said. He pointed his hand at the wall. A section warped outward, and then ripped loose. “I can still affect other things.” Techno stumbled backward as the piece of wall came flying at him.

Mindstar stopped outside of the door. He could feel Terry’s presence now; she was so close that he felt he could reach out and touch her. He pointed to the door. Strongarm nodded and turned around. Firemane moved up beside Mindstar. They knew Terry was likely to be in rough shape, so he and Firemane would deal with what they found while Strongarm watched their backs.

Nodding to Firemane, Mindstar moved to the door. The door slid up silently into the ceiling and they sprang through. No attack came at them, but they stopped as suddenly as if they’d run into a wall. Firemane had just cleared the door as it shut behind her.

Terry was lying on a cot of some sort, completely nude. They had expected that. What they hadn’t expected was that Terry’s body had completely shed the pregnant weight gain already. It was as if she had never been pregnant at all.

“Whoa,” Firemane breathed. “Talk about your fast recoveries.”

Terry moaned and sat up. She looked at them with blank eyes: blue, yes, but lifeless. She smiled beckoningly and motioned for them to come forward.

Mindstar didn’t move, but he locked eyes with her. “Terry, remember,” he said, slamming his consciousness into hers full force. He felt the drugged fog that they had dragged across her mind and attacked it with his will. He force-fed images of her as he had known her into her mind: strong, sometimes impulsive, full of life and fire. He could feel her pull back from the contact, but he could also feel something deep inside her mind stir.

“Firemane,” he said with some effort, “do your thing. I’m working on her mind, but you will have to cleanse her body.”

“Got it,” she said. She strode over to Terry and spread her hands over Terry’s body. Terry twitched and writhed as her mind burned from Mike’s invasion. Firemane began chanting the words that Alyina had taught her. As she did, a blue glow spread from her hands to Terry’s body.

Pain burst onto the bridge. “We’re here. Where are they?”

Carpenter was working the view controls rapidly. “I don’t know. I lost them. Stay close, they could be anywhere on these decks. I know they were headed in this direction.”

“Find them,” Pain snarled. “Find them so we can finish them.”

Rampage threw a straight right with all of his considerable power that hit Crimson Knight squarely in the chest plate. The impact threw Crimson Knight back several feet and unbalanced him. He couldn't recover in time and fell flat onto his back with a clang. “Gotcha, asshole,” Rampage exulted.

Techno and Wraith slid backward, closing up in the middle of the corridor, keeping Crimson Knight out of harms way for a few seconds. Aria and Wind Shear jumped forward, trying to pull Crimson to his feet. Mind Mistress kept up watch behind them.

Metalite reached out near where he had pulled the wall section loose. He had released that massive weight, but he found several slivers of metal that had come loose. Techno saw some of the slivers rise into the air and braced himself. He knew he couldn't dodge; that would leave the girls behind him wide open. He'd just have to guard his face and trust to luck and his armor.

Metalite flung the shards at Techno with such force that they broke the sound barrier. Several missed, being not very aerodynamic and, thus, hard to aim. One, however, embedded itself in the joint of Techno's right elbow, and another scored the armor on his left thigh. He cried out in pain and cringed, reaching for the shard still sticking out of his arm.

Banzai leapt forward, launching a spinning kick at Wraith. The violence of the attack, and Techno's cry of pain, left the speedster flat-footed. The kick hit Wraith solidly, sending him flying back and slamming him into the wall behind and to his right. The impact drove the air from his lungs and he crumpled, stunned and all but unconscious.

“No,” Aria shrieked. She charged forward to defend Wraith, throwing a wild punch at Banzai. Banzai ducked the punch and countered with a short hand strike to Aria's ribs. The impact drove her back and she stumbled over Wraith's body.

Metalite saw an opening and reached out for the wall segment he had dropped earlier. Warping it into a semi-cone, he slammed it over Wraith and Aria, trapping them.

“Wraith, Aria,” Mind Mistress cried. She finally levered Crimson Knight to his feet.

Wind Shear tried to step forward, but Rampage brushed off her attack and charged for Crimson Knight. He drew back his thick right hand to finish his foe off.

“Eat this,” Crimson snarled as he stuck his right gauntlet in Rampage's protruding face and fired his lasers. The brute roared in pain and staggered back, his hands going to his face.

“Come on,” Crimson Knight barked. “Continue pattern Epsilon.”

“But Wraith and Aria,” Techno panted as he yanked the bloody shard out of his elbow.

“We’ll come back for them,” Crimson breathed. “We’ve got a mission to accomplish.”

Mindstar felt Terry’s true consciousness reach out to him. He could almost see a slender, strong arm reaching up out of the drugged morass of her mind to him. He focused all of his mental power into one thrust, one reach for that hand. The tide of the drugs swelled up as he pulled back for an instant, threatening to drown her forever. Mindstar struck, grabbing hold of Terry’s true self before it vanished. He funneled all of his force, all of his drive, all of his love into that connection, that bond between their selves that nothing could erase.

For an instant, he saw Terry emerge from the poisons and taints the Beytraskans had given her, radiant and pure. Then he snapped back to his body. He could feel his lungs burning and sweat pouring off of his face. He staggered for a moment as the exhaustion washed over him.

“Mike?” Terry asked. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes and looked at her. In body, she hadn’t changed, but he recognized the eyes again. Terry was back.

She jumped off of the bed and threw her arms around him. “Oh, Mike, I can’t believe you came.”

“I’d never leave you,” he said, finding the strength to return the embrace. “You know that.”

“Oh my god,” she muttered, “Mike, what happened? I remember starting to go into labor, and then they took me to medical. I remember something about some robots breaking in, but then it gets so fuzzy.”

“Shh,” he said. “You were captured and taken to the Beytraskans spaceship. They gave you some sort of drug to dull your mind and make you like one of their women. I, I don’t know what they did with the baby.” As he thought that, he felt a light mental touch, so faint he almost didn’t notice it, except now he wasn’t focusing so much on Terry’s touch.

“You mean, you can’t feel him in your mind?” she asked.

“I, I’m not sure,” he said. “I’ve been focusing on finding you.”

“Speaking of me,” she said, glancing down between them, “you didn’t, by any chance, bring something for me to put on? I mean it’s nothing you haven’t seen before, but still.”

Mike smiled. "I thought you'd never ask." He released her long enough to reach around to the small of his back and pull out a small ball of orange fabric. "Couldn't bring the boots. Sorry about that."

She smiled as she released him and shook the fabric out into her uniform. "Hey, I'm definitely not choosy. I just can't stand the thought of those yahoos seeing me naked all of that time."

She pulled the costume on quickly, although Mindstar could see that she wanted to take her time and revel in the feeling. He knew how much suiting up meant to her, but he was glad she knew the importance of time. He was surprised they hadn't been attacked already, and he knew that that luck wouldn't last forever.

Terry smiled broadly as she wriggled the last part of the suit into place. "I guess the mask would be a waste of time," she said, "but I do miss the boots. Let's get going."

"Hold on just a minute," Mindstar said. "Are you sure you're up to this? You've been out of action for a while, just given birth, and have been put through the mental wringer. I won't risk you getting yourself killed trying to prove something, either to me or to yourself."

Terry didn't say anything for a second. She simply turned and walked over to the wall nearest the door. Taking a deep breath, she unleashed a straight right into the wall. The metal shrieked in protest as it deformed around the fist and forearm that had suddenly impaled them in it. It didn't break, but it came very close.

Terry turned back to Mindstar. *Don't you dare deny me this, Michael Longstreet*, Terry thought as she smiled at him.

I could never deny you anything for long, Theresa Josephson Longstreet. He thought back. He nodded. "Let's go get our son back."

"There," Carpenter barked. He locked into one camera and zoomed in. The image showed Mindstar, Power Woman, Strongarm and Firemane emerging from one of the rooms. None of the others knew where Terry had been kept, so they didn't recognize the room or the corridor.

"About damn time," Pain snarled. "Where is that?"

"Down one level, about ten yards from the elevator tube," Carpenter said. "I don't know how they got that close."

"They won't be getting much closer," Pain barked. "All right, let's move."

Aria tried to keep from crying out. She wasn't particularly claustrophobic, but being crammed inside a metal cone, lying on her stomach across Ray's lap was not her idea of a good time. She felt mildly lucky that Metalite hadn't cut off their sprawled feet when he slammed the metal section of wall around them. However, that didn't hide the fact that she was in the dark and very scared.

She also knew they were outside. She could hear Rampage roaring in pain for what seemed like minutes. She didn't think they'd forgotten about her, but she knew that the sounds of fighting had died out, so Jake and the others must have left. They had left her here, with Ray, wounded and alone. She knew Jake was cold-blooded; this just proved it. Nobody was going to look out for them but them.

Ray groaned and tried to move. "Be quiet," she breathed. "We're trapped. They're still outside."

"Got to," Ray groaned again, "get out. Got to, help, team."

"They'll be fine," Aria whispered. "I'm worried about us." She barely kept the snarl out of the first part.

She heard stomping receding away from them. She heard one heavy tread and two lighter ones. She guessed that Rampage was all right enough to walk away. She hadn't heard what had happened to him, but she guessed it couldn't be good. With them gone, she could try to get them out of this mess.

"Can you go wraith?" she asked, hopefully.

Ray screwed his eyes shut as he concentrated, but he didn't waver. He shook his head. "Ribs broken. Can't concentrate."

It was up to her then. She had fallen facedown across his lap, so she'd have to work to exert any force on the shell. Normally, Ray would have some response to her lying in such a position, even if only a wry joke. Evidently, the broken ribs were interfering with more than his powers.

Stretching forward, she was able to get her hands onto the deck. Wriggling her feet to tiptoe, she pushed backward in an awkward push up. She didn't move far. The curve of the metal came over her back and shoulders, where she would get the most push. It was closest over her calves, where she exerted little force. However, it did prove to her that the shell wasn't bonded to the wall somehow. It was just heavy.

The push had also bought her some space for her head. She knew that she shouldn't cut loose with a full power scream, for the risk that the outer hull was close, but she had an idea. Although she wasn't much of a physics student, she'd taken an interest in the physics of vibration after she'd discovered her powers. She'd seen the film clip of the Tacoma Narrows bridge dozens of times, watching as the vibration of the wind through

the gorge rippled the steel like taffy. She'd never duplicated that feat, but it gave her an idea to use here.

"This may get loud," she said as she turned to face the shell. She sang a low note, down at the bottom of her considerable range. She felt the vibration through her legs as she raised the pitch slowly, listening for a change in the vibration. She didn't put much air behind the notes; oxygen was a precious resource, and so was quiet. She didn't intend to waste either by shooting her bolt too soon.

She felt herself panting for breath as she finally hit the note. The air was becoming stale quickly with sweat and carbon dioxide from their breath, but the feel of the metal vibrating in sympathy with her voice encouraged and energized her. She increased her volume quickly; she knew they were running out of air. As she sang, she tried to push up.

At first, the metal did nothing. Then, as her volume increased, she felt the metal loosen and weaken under her pressure. Finally, as she felt voice cracking from lack of oxygen, the metal fell away with a clang, flattening out as it fell from the vibrations. Aria overbalanced and fell over onto her back.

She lay there for a moment, gulping in fresh air. Finally, when the dizziness had faded, she got to her feet and looked at Ray. He gave her a brave smile, but she could tell from his position, and the fact that he hadn't moved, that his broken ribs were giving him a lot of pain.

"Come on, lover boy," she said. "We've got to get you some help."

"Got, to, catch, up," he breathed. She didn't like the sound of his breathing. He wasn't showing any blood, but she hoped that a piece of a rib wasn't rubbing on his lungs.

"No," she said. "We have to get you some help." She put his arm around her shoulders and pushed to her feet. It wasn't easy, carrying his weight as well as her own, but she did it.

"Must, help, team," he breathed.

"I don't care about them, I only care about you," Aria snarled viciously. "They left us behind. We don't owe them anything." Glancing around, she started in the direction they had come, leaving Crimson and the others behind.

Mindstar stopped at the edge of another intersection. He could hear breathing around the corner. Reaching out with his mind, he felt the mental touches of those waiting for him. Power Woman stood next to him, with Firemane and Strongarm behind him. He nodded in response to their unspoken question, and they nodded back. Time to get it over with.

Mindstar and Power Woman turned the corner first, Strongarm and Firemane behind them. On the other side stood Mister Pain, Black Rook, Black Knight and Black Bishop. Pain and Rook were forward, the other two stood behind them. Pain was smiling grimly.

“Tired of hide and seek?” he asked mockingly.

“Good and ready to deal with you once and for all is more like it,” Mindstar replied.

“Ooh, I’m shakin’ in my boots,” Black Knight taunted.

“One last chance,” Power Woman said. “Get out of our way and walk away, or stay here and take your chances. They’re holding our son and we’re not going to stop until we get him back.”

“You didn’t talk so tough when Barkaz had you high and lying flat on your back,” Pain snarled. “Now let’s do this.”

Pain followed his last words with a mental attack at Mindstar. Evidently, he was hoping to use his sophomoric insult as a ploy to make Mindstar lose his concentration and focus. It didn’t work. Even though he was prepared, Mindstar had to focus his energies on defense to handle Pain’s force of will. Mindstar managed to slide himself to one side of the corridor to clear the way for the more physical combatants while he and Pain dueled.

Power Woman took up the challenge. She charged forward, angling for the Black Rook. Instead, at some signal that she didn’t notice, the Rook stepped past her and left her for Black Bishop. Her eyes widened as he brought his strange weapon to bear. She spun as he unleashed a wave of coruscating green energy. The blast didn’t do anything to the wall, but she had to move quickly to keep ahead of it as he tracked her.

Black Rook was heading for Strongarm. Strongarm’s smirk twisted one side of his mouth. Unable to use his weapons or fly in the tight corridors, the power armor was inferior to Strongarm’s metahuman strength and toughness. Strongarm swung a left hook to where he thought Black Rook was going to be. Instead, the armored man ducked the blow with surprising agility and fired an uppercut to Strongarm’s body. The punch connected solidly, pushing Strongarm back as the Rook punched again and again.

Black Knight raced through the initial confrontations, heading for Firemane. While they had not fought extensively during their earlier engagements, each knew quite a bit about each other from their teammates of the time. Firemane stood in a defensive posture, ready to stick an arm or leg out to trip the speedster. However, she was forced to dodge away as the Black Bishop’s beam flared down the corridor. She dodged right into the Black Knight’s path. The impact threw her down the corridor, bouncing off the walls. She spun her way back to her feet just in time to meet a vicious right cross to the jaw. The punch spun her back into a wall, stunning her.

Mindstar relaxed slightly as he felt the force of Pain's attack slacken. Pain was powerful, but Mindstar had trained with Mind Mistress enough to know that there is more to a mental battle than just power. Pain wasn't actually attacking Mindstar's mental shield; he was just throwing energy at it trying to get in. Mindstar took the energy and concentration he could spare from countering Pain's attack and formed it into a tight needle of thought. He then launched this needle at Pain.

As he expected, Pain had kept a shield up, just in case. However, Pain still didn't have much skill in mental combat. He thought of his shield as a solid wall protecting his mind. Mindstar, however, knew that mental shields more closely resembled weaves, like a tapestry or a Kevlar vest. Pain was expecting the kind of attack he was throwing: a straight bolt of mental force. Mindstar began worming his needle of thought through the weave of Pain's shield. He just hoped the others could hold on long enough for this to work.

Power Woman jumped as the beam sought her. She vaulted into a horizontal somersault above the beam. The move appeared to catch the Black Bishop off guard for a moment, and she smiled with the thought that she'd taken him by surprise. Instead, he swept the beam across and up. The green energy washed over her as she fell. Her legs buckled on landing as her strength failed. Fear gripped her guts as the beam played over her, draining for strength with each second.

Strongarm swung his head down, catching the Black Rook on the crown of his helmet. The ringing impact gave Strongarm a headache, but it pushed the Black Rook far enough back to take him out of punching range. Strongarm's stomach felt like a speed-bag as it was. Strongarm followed up with a grab with his left hand. He caught the Rook's shoulder plate and pulled him forward, right into a rising right knee. The impact drove the Rook stumbling back again, armored hands going to the stomach of the armor. The impact didn't feel much better on Strongarm's knee, but he knew he had the initiative.

Firemane groaned as she slumped at the base of the last wall she'd bounced into. She could barely hear the sounds of combat over the ringing in her ears. As much as she wanted to just lie there and rest, she knew that her friends needed her. She just had to find a way to land a punch on that speedster.

A low, evil chuckle from above her gave her an idea. Mindstar had taught her some of the techniques for fighting when you couldn't see. While she wasn't blind, it did allow her to locate her enemy without raising her head from her chest. When she felt his breath on her head, she struck. Her right hand shot upwards in a ridge-hand strike. She felt her opponent's nose crumple under her punch as his blood splattered her glove. She shot to her feet as he stumbled back.

"You bitch," he snarled, staggering back, holding both hands to his bleeding snout, "you broke my fuckin' nose."

“We’re just getting started,” she replied with a smile as she dropped into a defensive posture.

Crimson Knight glanced behind him as he dodged down another corridor. Wind Shear was helping Techno along behind him, with Mind Mistress bringing up the rear. He wasn’t sure where they were going, but he guessed that, since the big corridors ran this way, this way the long axis of the ship and, thus, the way to engineering. He also knew that they were between Rampage and engineering, and he sincerely hoped to keep it that way.

Where is everybody? Mind Mistress thought to him.

I don’t know, and I don’t like it, he thought in reply. The same idea had been bugging him for some time. On a ship this size, he expected to see some crew wandering around. So far, they hadn’t seen a soul that they didn’t know. That worried Jake. It was almost as if someone was directing them out of their path.

“Hang on,” he heard Wind Shear telling Techno, “just hang on a little longer.”

Crimson Knight was about to say something encouraging when he saw something even more encouraging. A pair of double doors blocked the wide corridor, which meant that something important was on the other side. “Heads up, people,” he said, “looks like that could be the objective.”

None too soon, Mind Mistress thought from the rear. *They’re getting closer.*

As Crimson approached the doors, he looked around for any sort of opening device, even if only to disable it. Instead, as he got within a few feet, the doors slid open on their own. As he stormed in, he saw that the room was several levels high, with balconies around a circular tower. The base of the tower was three stories below, a long enough jump even with flight capability. The top was probably another two stories up. As they came in, Crimson Knight could see another door, on the opposite side and a story below, closing.

“Damn, somebody ordered them out,” he said. “That seals it.” He moved to the side as Wind Shear and Techno struggled in, with Mind Mistress bringing up the rear. He motioned them away from the doors. When the doors shut, Crimson brought up his right gauntlet. After a quick adjustment on the outside of the laser housing, he began firing his laser at the center of the doors. The beam was longer and less powerful than the normal beam, but it proved capable of fusing the metal of the doors together.

“Hopefully, Rampage will be his usual stupid self,” Crimson said. “I don’t have the time or the juice to seal all of the doors.”

Wind Shear helped Techno to slump down by the doors. His skin was pale, and blood was congealing on his right gauntlet. She reached out with her right hand and touched

the wound gently as she chanted in Chinese. Blue light glowed from her hand and seeped into the wound, infusing it with energy. Techno stiffened as the energy flowed into him. After a few seconds, Wind Shear stopped chanting and the blue energy faded away.

“Muchas gracias,” Techno said, cracking a smile. His skin tone was back to its usual tan hue, and his arm moved easily as he tested it. “Good as new, except for the mess.”

“De nada,” Wind Shear replied in passable Spanish. Techno’s eyes widened for a moment, and then stayed wide as he looked around. “Madre de dios. I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

“Better get to it,” Crimson said, “or Rampage will make that all too literal.”

Techno and Wind Shear scampered down the ramps along the outer wall of the chamber down to the ground level, where the controls appeared to be. Mind Mistress stayed by Crimson Knight’s side. “I’ll let Mindstar know we’re here.”

“And are holding out,” Crimson said. He left out ‘for now.’

Aria groaned in frustration. Wraith was little more than dead weight on her aching right shoulder. She still hadn’t seen anyone at all to ask where Medical was, and she couldn’t read what little writing there was on the walls. Why couldn’t these aliens use a red cross like normal people, she thought. Taking a deep breath, she started off again, turning another corner.

Finally, she saw what she was looking for: a room with an open door, beds, cabinets, and a lot of equipment. While she wasn’t a doctor, she hoped that she could find something that she could use. Dragging Wraith in, she stopped. Someone was here.

He was tall, muscular, and gorgeous, with long, blonde hair and a ripped build covered by only a leather harness and codpiece. He looked just as surprised as Aria to see someone come in. Aria fought to still the arousal that erupted within her at the sight of the man’s perfect body.

“He’s hurt,” she said, slowly and carefully, as if talking to a child. “Please help him.”

“Help, yes,” the man said, nodding vigorously. He pointed to one of the beds. “There.”

Aria nodded, moving to the bed and laying Wraith on it as gently as she could. He groaned as the motion ground his broken ribs together. “Aria,” he gasped, “where?”

“Shh, it’s all right,” she whispered to him as she bent over him. “I’ve found help. You’re going to be just fine.”

“Yes,” a deep voice said from just behind her. “Just fine.” Aria started to turn around, her face already falling into a scowl in order to scold him for sneaking up behind her. Just because he was drop-dead gorgeous didn’t give him the right to go sneaking around like that.

Her scowl turned into a shriek as he stuck something long and pink into her face. Her eyes widened and her mouth opened to launch a piercing note when white liquid exploded out of the pink thing onto her face. Aria stumbled back, trying to wipe the white goo off of her face. Her muscles failed her, her arms not responding to her commands, and her legs proved unable to stop her fall. She fell back across Wraith, but she barely felt the impact as her thoughts vanished into a warm, content fog.

Mindstar focused his will, striving to maintain his guard. Pain’s mental attack kept pounding at his shields in waves, but he was no closer to breaking through than before. Mindstar, on the other hand, was boring slowly, delicately, inside Pain’s shields. All he needed was time, only seconds now.

“Now or never,” Power Woman gasped. She began increasing her density. The increased density also increased her strength, giving her enough power to push up off of the deck as it creaked and groaned under the strain. Black Bishop stumbled back in shock as she rose, playing the beam off of her for a split second. It was enough of an opening for her powerful legs, each now weighing more than her whole body at normal density, to push her forward into the air. Before Black Bishop could bring the beam down again, Power Woman threw herself at him in a flying tackle. Her right shoulder hit him first, driving deep into his abdomen. His breath exploded out of him as he was driven into the deck by tremendous force, the strength draining beam gun flying from his hand. The sickening crunch as he landed presaged broken ribs, at the very least.

Power Woman stood up, looking down at her unconscious foe. “Wrong time to ask for a date, fella.”

Strongarm threw another left uppercut to the belly of the Black Rook’s armor. The blows were actually denting the armor compound, and the grunts from within indicated in no uncertain terms that they weren’t doing the meat inside any good. The Black Rook sagged to his knees, panting heavily under the armor.

“Give up,” Strongarm said, panting himself from the exertion. “You’re beat.”

“Never,” the Rook replied, launching a swinging uppercut from the floor as he rose. Strongarm stepped around him easily, anticipating the flailing attack, and grabbed him from behind. With one smooth motion, he rammed the Black Rook’s head into the nearest wall with crunching force. He released the suit and stepped back, allowing it to fall, motionless, to the deck.

Firemane rocked back as the Black Knight came at her, blood streaming and spraying from his broken nose. She blocked the clumsy punches easily, despite their speed. The Knight was too enraged to fight effectively. Firemane found herself holding back a chuckle. Once, that would have been her, flailing in juvenile anger at someone who had hurt me. Now, she dodged, blocked, and waited for her shot.

A swinging right hook gave her the opening she needed. Blocking the blow past with her left hand, she threw a right hand strike into Black Knight's unprotected body. Her enhanced strength lent ferocity to the simple blow, and the Black Knight spun away into the wall behind him. He slumped, holding his wounded side.

"Paralysis bolt," she said, holding out a hand imperiously. The bolt of translucent energy washed over his body and he slumped down, still looking up at her.

She smiled sweetly and blew him a kiss. "Don't go anywhere."

Mindstar felt his penetrator pierce Pain's mind shield. With a grunt, he threw his power into a single, searing bolt of mental agony. Pain roared, his hands flying to his head, and he staggered back. Mindstar panted for air as the pounding at his shields ceased.

Pain looked up, his eyes burning with rage. "You won't beat me that easily." His hands glowing with lethal energy, he charged at Mindstar. Mindstar stepped to one side and threw a knife-hand at the nearest wrist, slamming both of Pain's hands together and followed it up with a punch to the kidney. Pain staggered away, but spun around just in time to see a roundhouse kick flying at his jaw. The tip of Mindstar's boot hit with crunching force, spinning Pain around and down again.

Pain growled as he stood again. "I will not be beaten," he roared. His hands were barely raised above his sides, and he staggered, but he stood.

"Shut up," Mindstar replied and launched another roundhouse kick. This one also landed on Pain's jaw and dropped him. This time, he did not get up.

"About time," Power Woman said from behind him, smiling.

"We were wondering when you'd quit playing around," Firemane chimed in.

"Sure took you long enough," Strongarm added.

"It's good to be appreciated," Mindstar snarled in reply. "Crimson and team are in Engineering. We don't have much time."

"Damn," Crimson Knight swore. The doors before him resounded with Rampage's furious blows, but the doors showed no damage from those. Rather, the burned scar

down the center that fused the doors together was slowly returning to a small, but visible, seam.

“Techno,” Crimson Knight said into his radio, “the doors appear to be repairing themselves. I don’t have the power to keep refusing them.”

“Si,” Techno said simply. “Don’t get your catheters in a wad,” he breathed as he tapped furiously on the small keypad inset on his left gauntlet. A hair-thin fiber-optic cable joined that gauntlet to the control panel that Techno stood over. His goggles flashed images at him, shimmering images of the Beytraskan computer system as it executed his commands.

“Good thing these pendejos have never heard of a firewall,” he muttered as he easily moved from database to database, downloading as much as he dared. This was a gold mine of technical information, but it would all go to waste if Rampage got them. Reluctantly, he began a dedicated search for system command codes. He hoped there was a ‘help’ or ‘man’ file around here somewhere.

In the blink of an eye, the search returned a data set containing command codes for many functions, some mundane and some much more useful. Finding the one he wanted, he keyed in for the speakers of his helmet to play it, since he knew that most systems were keyed for voice activation.

“*Mugatch, gorosh goron oino.*” He worked his mouth after he got the unfamiliar words out. Slamming sounds echoed through the chamber as blast doors slammed down over all of the portals into the chamber.

“Nice work,” Crimson Knight said.

“De nada,” Techno replied, and went back to his perusal of the more useful databases.

The pounding stopped for a moment. “Have they left?” Mind Mistress asked.

“Doubt it,” Crimson replied. “Probably convincing Rampage to try a better idea.”

The pounding resumed, but this time it sounded more like a very loud knocking. “Hey, Guardians,” Rampage’s gravelly tones sneered, even in a bellow. “I’ve got your two buds here. You’ve got one minute to open up, or I play pop the weasel.”

“Who does he have?” Crimson asked.

Mind Mistress closed her eyes, reaching out through the wall. She could feel the familiar mental vibrations, even unconscious. “Wraith and Aria,” she replied. “They’re out, they may be drugged.”

“Damn,” Crimson said. “Techno, I need you to find the command to set a self-destruct on the reactor and fast. Rampage doesn’t count very well.”

Indeed, as Techno searched frantically for the command code only about thirty seconds later came the call, “Time’s almost up, punks.”

“Techno,”

“That’s one they don’t have, boss,” Techno replied.

“Get ready to open the doors,” Crimson said, readying himself for combat.

A thunderous crash sounded and the doors actually seemed to flex, as if huge mass had been thrown into them. More sounds filtered through the door, crashes and thuds. “Open the doors,” Crimson said.

“Mugatch, gorosh goron olio.” As the doors slid open, Mind Mistress gasped and Crimson grunted in surprise. Tony hefted Wraith in one hand and was picking Aria up with the other. Metalite and Banzai were fastened to two nearby walls with ice bindings, with Sarah looking on, dressed in a bikini of some sheer fabric, and Rampage was picking himself up off of the floor.

“Get in here,” Crimson called. Indeed, as they rushed in, Rampage pushed onto his hands and Banzai broke one of his shackles.

Tony and Sarah darted into the room and Techno closed the doors behind them. “I thought you two were supposed to be out of here by now,” Crimson said.

“We were heading that way,” Tony said, “but the effects of the drugs finally wore off and we decided to see if we could give you a hand. We saw one of the aliens take Wraith and Aria to Rampage, and we waited. When we heard him threaten to kill them, we knew we needed to do something. I tackled Rampage and Sarah kept the other two on ice.”

“We can help,” Sarah said. “You need every hand you can get.”

“We’ll discuss this later,” Crimson said gruffly. He was glad that he wore a mask; he wasn’t able to hide his smile at their courage. Now he just had to attend to Wraith and Aria.

“Wind Shear,” he called, “can you heal them?”

“I’m not as skilled as Firemane,” she replied. “I can’t work on this level. We’ll have to wait until Mindstar and the rest finish on the command deck.”

Mindstar strode down the corridor, the other Guardians behind him. While his heart burned to start running towards the bridge and confrontation, he knew that he had expended a great deal of energy in his battle with Pain and he needed to recharge, at least partially. He knew the others were also weakened, but none complained. They wouldn't.

Mindstar strode into a larger, open chamber that was perhaps ten feet on a side. Just as Power Woman entered the chamber, the lights went out, plunging them into blackness. A ringing slam announced the closing of the rear door. An insistent pounding also announced that Strongarm and Firemane were on the other side. "Looks like somebody wants a private party," Mindstar said.

"Three guesses who," Power Woman said. Suddenly, she doubled over with a gasp.

"What's wrong?" Mindstar asked as he looked around for the assailant.

"It, feels, like," she gasped, "I'm giving, birth, again."

"You bastard," Mindstar roared at the darkness. Suddenly, he found himself slammed backwards by an invisible wave of force. He slammed into a wall and rebounded, slumping to his hands and knees.

"Bastard," a new voice said, "an unkind term, although perhaps appropriate, for one who is, genetically speaking, your son." The lights came back on, illuminating Barkaz, more muscular than before, standing before them, smiling and spreading his arms wide.

"What have you done with our son?" Mindstar snarled as he pulled himself to his feet.

"The child waits beyond," Barkaz said. "I could not slay him. No, in time, he will become a true Beytraskan, with powers to impart to our staid genetic repository. You see, the Rebirth Virus that made us what we are had one great trap. It fixed our genetics for all time. Oh, we vary in hair color and a few other minor characteristics, but we lack the ability to develop any truly useful mutations. Your powers will provide that capability. I suppose I should thank you for providing the raw material, but I doubt you would consider it much of an honor."

Mindstar lunged at Barkaz, his right hand outstretched in a strike. He struck a wall of solid air and rebounded, stumbling back, holding his stinging hand and wrist. "Now you know how it feels," Barkaz said. "Facing a foe who can attack with the mind and invisible bolts of force."

Mindstar linked with Power Woman. She was fighting to overcome the pain of Barkaz's attack. Both lay on the floor, only feet from each other, but so far away. At least, to physical distance, they were far away. To the mind, they were closer than close. *Link with me*, he thought. *He is one; we are two. That is our strength, my love.*

Mindstar gritted his teeth as her pain poured into him through the link. Still, by linking with her and giving her part of his mental shielding, the attack abated for them both. Mindstar looked up and saw Barkaz looking down at him. Mustering his/her power, he/she unleashed a bolt of telekinetic force. Barkaz had shields up, but the force of the blast staggered him.

Mindstar/Power Woman got to his/her feet and advanced. “You fool,” they chorused as they rained attacks on Barkaz, bolts of telekinetic force flying from each one; not as powerful as the strongest of Mindstar’s attacks, they were flying more rapidly than Mindstar could launch them. “You sought to attack two and forged them into one.”

Barkaz replied with a roar and a storm of telepathic power, trying to shatter their link in the noise. Mindstar and Power Woman held fast to the link, weathering the storm with images of strength, endurance, and love.

Barkaz’s storm spent itself. Mindstar reached down and raised Barkaz’s chin, which Power Woman struck with a full-power right cross. The snapping of bone indicated at least a broken jaw and possibly a broken neck.

The door in the rear of the chamber opened, dumping Strongarm onto the deck as he swung both fists into suddenly empty air. Firemane jumped over him and landed in a fighting stance. “Where are they?”

“Just him,” Mindstar said. “But I don’t think he’s the last one.”

“Bright of you,” another voice said. Smooth and deep, it seemed to pour like syrup or honey. “Barkaz led our exploratory mission to your planet, but he was not the overall leader now. I am.” He strode through the open door; dressed similar to Barkaz, they looked similar enough to be brothers. This man, however, possessed a fluid grace that Barkaz tried to emulate and failed.

“I am Irkan,” he said simply. “I lead this mission now. I have five clans orbiting in this vessel. You are powerful, but you are but few. Explain to me why I should not simply detach my clan pods to land where they will. None of your pitiful defensive systems can harm them, nor, once they release their cargos of nanomachines, would any of your people wish to harm them. We would bring you technologies that you have only dreamed of. Why do you resist?”

“We resist,” Mindstar replied, “because you demean us, and life in general. You would turn all women into mindless sex slaves.”

“Why do you care?” Irkan replied. “You are a male.”

“And I love a woman,” Mindstar replied. “I not only love her body and her form, but I love her mind, her spirit and her soul. If those were taken from her, she would be less than the woman I love, even if her body was improved. I may be male, but I am a man,

and that means that a strong woman does not diminish or intimidate me. She enobles me.”

“Touching, really,” Irkan sneered, “but you have given me no reason why I should not ignore you and continue.”

“Try this,” Mindstar said. Linking his mind to Crimson Knight’s, he said both verbally and mentally, “Initiate Armageddon scenario.”

“Techno,” Crimson Knight said as Mindstar’s voice sounded in his mind. “Lock all external docking cradles.”

Techno gargled and spat a command.

“Seal all escape pods.”

“Bring reactor to full power.”

“Stand by to input overload code.”

“You’re insane,” Irkan stammered. “You’d kill yourselves as well.”

“Yes,” Mindstar said. “We would.”

“It would be worth it,” Power Woman replied, “to have your insanity end here and now.”

“Even,” Irkan said, “the life of your son?” Another man walked into the room, this one cradling a human infant in his arms. But Mindstar didn’t notice the child, even as he heard its cries in his mind. His eyes were on the man.

“Brian?”

“Ah, yes,” Irkan said, his confidence returning. “Your mentor. Barkaz boasted to me of capturing him. The humans, Callaghan and Taylor, also expressed pride in his capture. As you can see, he serves me now. Brian, why don’t you deactivate the puny measures that these insolent heroes have put on my ship?”

Mindstar held his breath. Firemane could only remove the influence of the Beytraskan nanomachines with time; time that he didn’t think Irkan was going to give them. None of the girls had been able to resist the influence when they had been in the ship. Brian had a powerful will, but was he strong enough?

“Mugatch, fralla teirre benen,” Brian said, stepping towards Mindstar and Power Woman, and turning away from them so that his back was to them and his face to Irkan. Irkan’s mouth hung open as a voice began to speak from the engineering room.

“What have you done?” Irkan stammered again. “You activated the self destruct for them.”

“Yes,” Brian said. “You transformed my body, but you failed to transform my mind or my spirit. I have served you because I needed you to believe in me, to place your defense in my hands. You have failed. Do as they say, or perish with us. You and all of your clans shall perish here and now.”

“You would do this for them?” Irkan gestured at the space between them. A globe of light appeared with images within. It took a moment for Mindstar to understand what he was seeing. The Revered was leading one of his protests. Protestors held signs with “Down With Muties,” and other slogans on them painted on them in red. “They hate and fear you, and you would give your lives for them? They are fools, and we would deal with them as such.”

“We would do this for them,” Mindstar said, “because they know not what they do. They are being led astray, and we can not bring them back with the closed fist. That will only breed anger and resentment. Instead, we must educate them. So, yes, we would die for them, because they deserve a chance to change. We would not take that chance from them.”

“You never asked people if they wanted to become like you,” Firemane said. “You just did it to them. Brian didn’t want to be like you.”

Irkan looked at the floor for a long moment. “This planet is not suitable for colonization,” he said. “Barkaz was mistaken to have believed so. He has paid for his error. We will return to our world. But mark my words. There are others in the cosmos that will not be so easily dissuaded. We are not harsh masters; there are others who are.”

“And we will return to our world to await them,” Mindstar said. “Along with the criminals you freed. We will defend what is ours. If you had come openly and honestly, we would have worked with you. But you did not. You came in the dark and you will leave in the dark without the world having known you were here.”

Irkan nodded. “If you wish, you may take the female that you harbored for a time. She is contaminated. I would not have her remain.”

Mindstar nodded. “Agreed. We will leave as we came.”

Irkan pointed to Barkaz’s unconscious form. “I will have the refuse removed. I hope never to see it, or you, again.”

Mindstar sent a thought winging to Earth below. *Bring us home.* An instant later, a blue field enfolded them, rapidly obscuring the sight of Irkan's scowling face and Barkaz's body lying on the deck. One sickeningly long fall later and the glow faded, replaced by the training room. Alyina stood on one side, Alex on the other. Both were sweating and panting with exertion, but both smiled. The Guardians stood upright; the Shadow Empire and Rampage lay unconscious on the floor.

"Welcome home," Alyina said. "And well done."

"Thanks," Mindstar said. "It's great to be back."

Gunny spun around and unleashed a vicious right hook to Taylor's jaw. "You son of a bitch," he swore, "we trusted you. We believed in you and you betrayed us. You sold out everything you used to believe in for a new body. We don't want a damn thing to do with you."

The punch had knocked Taylor to the ground. "You'll regret this," he said, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth. "When my allies take over, you'll be sorry you squandered this chance."

"I doubt it," Lancelot said, stepping out of the shadows. Several MPs emerged with him. "Take General Taylor into custody. I'll take charge of the rest."

When the MPs had left with Taylor, Lancelot clapped slowly. "I'm proud of you all. I knew you were always on the right side, you just took Taylor at his word too often."

"What now?" Gunny said. "We all assaulted MPs, we left custody, we should be stuck in Leavenworth for years if not dumped."

"All of the MPs were volunteers," Lancelot said. "We had you under observation the whole time. We knew about your conspiring, about Taylor visiting you. The MPs on duty tonight volunteered knowing full well that they could be injured or killed, but they also knew that you needed the chance to clear your names. Consider them cleared. Now, we still need Project Omicron, so we still need you."

Gunny looked at the others. They were still looking to him to lead them. "We'll have to think about it."

Lancelot nodded. "Fair enough. Take as much time as you need. Consider yourselves on leave. When you decide, let me know."

EPILOGUE

Mike hated to cry. It was normally not a big thing, but now, seeing Ray and Melissa loading the taxi for the trip to the airport, he was choking back tears. Lindsey and Jinn weren't having much luck doing the same, if they were even trying, and Melissa was crying like a fountain.

Still, it couldn't be helped. The drug that the Beytraskan "doctor" had doped them with had impaired their powers dramatically. Not coincidentally, it had also cut back on their unusual appetites, so that they were essentially normal young adults. They needed a chance to live that life.

"Everything's all set," Mike said as he clasped Ray's hand. "Trinity wasn't real happy with the explanation, but they took it. As far as they're concerned, you've been on a sabbatical for the past year or so, and now you're returning with full academic record intact and all account paid up."

"Thanks a lot, man," Ray said. "You guys mean a lot to us." Dropping his bags, he wrapped Mike in a back-thumping, rib-crushing hug, which Mike returned. Ray winced as he stood back.

"Mike, thanks so much," Melissa said, embracing him, her tears pouring down to wet the shoulders of his shirt. Neither noticed or cared.

"Come on," Ray said after completing his rounds. "The meter's running." Many more goodbyes were said before the couple made it inside the taxi, and many arms waved them away.

"We won," Lindsey said. "So why doesn't it feel like it?"

"We survived," Mike corrected. "We were so keyed up that we had never really thought about what next. Besides, you're getting a taste of what we went through after the White House. Sure, we had won, but we'd left two of our own dead on the field. Ray and Melissa aren't dead, but Wraith and Aria are."

"It just feels, hollow, somehow," Kat said. "Still, we got Terry, Tony, Sarah, Brian and Mike jr. back, so that's a win."

"Very definitely," Brian said, standing with his arm around Alyina with Alex looking on. Brian's hair was back to its natural gray, and his face had regained the wrinkles it had lost. Alex was the only one who could explain what he did, and he talked a lot about 'accepting' the changes, or not, in Brian's case. Still, he had been able to reverse the effects of the Beytraskan drug on Brian, as well as deal with most of the remnants in Terry's system.

"Yes," Marka said, coming up with Mike Jr. "It was very good." Mike Jr. was growing at an accelerated rate, but Marka assured them that it was normal. Beytraskan children grew at a much greater rate than human children. Still, they found it slightly

disconcerting to throw out all of their measures of when little Mikey should be doing this or that.

Mike looked around. He'd always remember Ray and Melissa, but the people he really cared about were right here, right now. "Come on, gang, let's get back to it." Irkan's final dig stuck with him. If there were other alien races out there, looking for Earth, the Guardians would need to be more ready than they were now. The entire Earth would need to be more ready.

The man groaned as bright sunlight stabbed through his closed eyelids. Groaning again, he reached down. He found damp, spongy dirt, which was not what he was expecting. His thoughts flowed slowly. His eyes cleared as he blinked away grit. He saw towering trees, green leaves and plants.

"Where, am, I?" he stammered, unused to the language, but not recalling another. Pushing himself to his feet, he noticed his utter lack of clothing and ignored it. He was not uncomfortable. His muscles moved easily, betraying no weakness or lack of exercise.

"Hey, there's something over here," he heard a voice say from behind him. Turning, he saw a young female with brown hair, wearing a tight top and shorts that fit her athletic body perfectly. He smiled at her surprised expression. Another female, this one with blonde hair and a more slender figure, approached the first, equally shocked. The man smiled. This was something he could do.