

## THE FOUNDATION: CHAPTER SIX DEFECTIONS

By  
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The Reverend fought to still his hands from twitching. The long drive from Boston to Washington, D.C. had not tired him; rather, he was filled with nervous energy that he could not release by pacing or doing. Instead, the energy built and built inside of him. He wanted to drive, he wanted to fly; he wanted to get out, walk and preach. He knew that only the last, preaching, would truly burn off this energy. Preaching the gospel of humanity was the only action that truly satisfied him any more.

The sumptuous confines of the limousine did little to dispel his nervous energy. The seats were hand-sown leather, the glass tinted so dark as to be almost opaque, the chilled champagne of the finest vintage. It was a gift from a wealthy disciple in Boston, who had promised to the Reverend's usage while he was in Washington. The Reverend suspected that the disciple in question had simply wanted the Reverend out of town, but he would have appeared mistrusting to say such things aloud, and he knew that his flock was still too fickle for such a display.

"Why are we coming to this nest of sin?" his faithful assistant asked. She had been a simple whore when he had found her and, by faith and love, given her something to believe in. Granted, she still had the generous figure of a whore, but her heart had changed. She did not trust this city. That was good. If she did not trust it, she would not trust anyone in it.

"To shed the light of the Lord on it, my angel," the Reverend replied. "We must reveal the devils at its heart for what they are, or the good people of the city will remain forever blind to their depredations and never rise up to oppose them."

"Yes, Reverend," she said piously. "I only meant that you have not been well lately. This crusade could wait until you are well."

"No," the Reverend barked. He despised being reminded of his recent weakness. For some reason, ever since that demon Mindstar and his wench had been in Boston, the Reverend had felt weak. He had been unable to preach and to work at his accustomed rates for weeks now. While the energy drove him on, it fell short time and again. He could not rest, though. He had to put the word out. "I will not be delayed in this quest. I must take my message to other cities. The faithful in Boston will carry on my work there."

"Yes, Reverend," she replied. "Should I arrange a hotel for us?"

The Reverend shook his head. “No. I have already made arrangements with a disciple in the city to house us. He has proceeded us, just as the Lord’s disciples proceeded him into every city and town whither he himself would go.” He smiled at the quote. While he did not believe that he was the Second Coming, there was not denying that the world was reeling towards Armageddon. Perhaps, with enough good works, he could still make the Rapture. One could only hope.

Mike smiled as he leaned forward to look at the monitor. Terry was instructing Kat, Tony and Sarah on the finer points of algebra. Terry’s pregnancy was advanced enough that she was showing, although Mike found the changes entrancing. Terry’s superhuman strength and endurance allowed her to carry the extra weight effortlessly, although it did affect her balance on occasion. He found her nothing short of breathtaking.

A sharp buzz from his right turned his attention to another monitor. He keyed in a command to receive the transmission. Brian Carpenter’s careworn features appeared in the large screen. “Mike, I’m glad you’re on call.”

“What’s the situation?” Mike asked. Normally, when Carpenter called, the Guardians deployed.

“Low-level, but troubling,” Carpenter replied. His voice held none of the urgency it usually did when briefing the team on some metahuman threat. Instead, he sounded profoundly tired and slightly scared. “I’ve been checking into your reports of a military superteam. I haven’t found anything definite yet, but I have poked around enough to get a very bad feeling.”

“What is it?” Mike asked. “Missing soldiers or something?”

“Missing is right,” Carpenter replied. “I managed to pinpoint a program a few months ago that tested all military personnel for ‘certain genetic abnormalities’. The results of the tests are classified most secret, so I don’t know what they said, but.” He let his voice trail off.

“Tests for metahumans,” Mike said. “After the Battle for Washington, they couldn’t ignore us any longer, so they decided to see if they had anyone already on the payroll.”

“That’s what it looks like,” Carpenter replied. “I’m running down transfers from about that period, to see if I can find a pattern. I’ve got a very few hits, but enough to form the kind of team you described before. I’m checking further into those hits to see what’s there, but I don’t like what I’ve seen so far. I want you down here.”

“Why?” Mike asked. “This is your bailiwick. I’m needed here, to work with our two recruits.”

“Bullshit,” Carpenter replied. “Terry’s handling them, and probably better than you could. We need a stealth team down here pronto to handle this investigation. There’s only so far I can go.”

Mike grimaced. “That’s not our styles. For God’s sake, we’re supposed to be heroes! Heroes don’t go snooping around the nation’s capitol hoping to catch members of the government in some plot.”

“This is different,” Carpenter said. “Remember those people we pulled out of that farm in Texas? Suppose those aliens took what they knew and were able to refine the process, to convert someone to their side before anyone knew they were missing, or else bribe or otherwise influence them? We’re fighting the same battle, son, but they’ve just changed the venue.”

“All right, all right,” Mike acquiesced, although uneasily. “We’ll need a team that can be at full power without looking like anything’s amiss. That knocks out Crimson Knight and Techno; those two are either on or off, and it’s easy to tell which is which. It also puts a kibosh on Firemane. I’m not sure how long Kat can stay transformed, and besides, we just got her schooling started up again, and I don’t want to pull her out of that for some wild goose chase.”

“It’s no wild goose chase,” Carpenter replied, “but you’re probably right. I would suggest your little friend from Virginia, Lindsey.”

Mike nodded. “Both telepaths is probably not a bad idea, although it does leave a bad taste in my mouth to have Lindsey indiscriminately scanning people. She’s too young to be in that situation yet.”

“Your call,” Carpenter said. “I want you in Washington by tonight.” He cut the connection before Mike could respond.

“I don’t like this,” Mike muttered as he keyed in a control sequence. “Attention, all personnel report to briefing room immediately,” came over the intercom system in Terry’s voice. “I don’t like this one bit.”

The team piled into the briefing room in a hurry. Jake had most of the team downstairs training, and they were sweaty and somewhat rank, especially all together. Mike held back a smile as Kat wrinkled her nose when Terry led the students in. Sarah also looked offended by the pong, but Tony just kept looking around, apparently trying to absorb every detail.

“I have just received an unusual mission assignment from the Foundation,” Mike said. “We have a possible infiltration in Washington, D.C. by the same aliens that attacked us in Texas. To bring Tony and Sarah up to speed quickly,”

“You were investigating a series of kidnappings,” Tony interrupted, “when you stumbled upon a nest of highly advanced aliens that had been transforming the kidnap victims into servants and warriors for them. The battle resulted in Terry’s being exposed to an alien mutagen that accelerated her pregnancy by approximately six times.”

Dr. Stone cleared his throat. “Anthony asked some rather pointed questions regarding Theresa’s condition, so I took the liberty of illuminating him.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Mike said, managing to keep the irony out of his voice. “Now, for the rest of the story. We have every reason to believe that these aliens are human, or very near human, in appearance, and that they have managed to perfect a means of mind control using nanomachines. Based on this information, the Foundation suspects that the aliens have moved their base of operations to Washington, DC, and are using their technology to control certain individuals there. We have been requested to send a team to investigate.”

“How?” Rich asked. “By you and Lindsey scanning people at random to see who’s been taken over? That’s nasty.”

“No,” Mike replied sharply. “I will not let this mission turn into a witch hunt. We will not use telepathy to replace honest investigation and probable cause. However, we are one of the few agencies that can investigate this sort of crime with a reasonable probability of success.

“Now, however, we need to form a special team. Our standard teams are not designed for this sort of operation and, besides, some of you are distinctly unsuited for this type of operation. So, the team will be as follows: myself, Lindsey, Rich, Ray and Melissa. Jake, you’re in charge until we get back.”

“Wait a minute,” Kat said, “I want to go with you.”

Mike shook his head. “Sorry. The team will need to be ready to fight at a moment’s notice for long periods of time, and we don’t know how long you can sustain your transformation into Firemane. Also, you’ve missed enough schooling. Now that you are working with Tony and Sarah full time, you’re on restricted duty. You’ll deploy against any magical threats, or if we have to put everybody into the field, but you’ll spend most of your time here.”

“Man, that sucks,” Kat said in a tiny voice.

“Don’t worry,” Rich said. “Once we bust these aliens, things will settle down.”

“I hope so,” Jake said. “Do you want us on standby to assist?”

“Negative,” Mike said with a definitive shake of his head. “The rest of you need to be ready to respond to any other situation that comes up. Don’t worry, we’ll be fine. Now,

those of you coming with me need to back for at least a week, but pack quickly. We need to be on the road in the next two hours to make it to D.C. on time.”

Lancelot willed himself to almost absolute silence as he crept along the wall, one careful step at a time. Even though this was only a training exercise, the automated weapons that dotted the shooting house were armed with live ammunition or enough power to injure, perhaps kill. Lancelot had never thought live fire training was worth the risk, but General Travis was convinced that Omicron needed to be “toughened up” after they had run from the Guardians before, so live fire it was.

As he crept up to a T-junction, he saw Amazon creep up on the opposite side. As much as he wanted to be chivalrous and go first, he knew that such a gesture would be foolish, since she would misinterpret it as a doubt of her own abilities. Of course, if he gestured for her to go first, she’d likely see that as more male chauvinist crap. So, he waited for her to signal which way. She made a sharp hand gesture, indicating that she would go first and move to the right. He’d back her up and go left. He nodded.

She moved immediately. Lancelot had a split second to hear the hum of a charging power capacitor before he broke cover, making a sharp turn around the wall. The room was square, with openings in all four walls, and with four pedestal-mounted automated weapons mounts. He caught a brief glimpse of blue energy around the muzzle of the one in front of him before he slammed his right shoulder into it. He caught it on the junction between the large weapon and the relatively narrow pedestal. With a shriek of overstressed metal, the blow tore the weapon loose and sent it flying across the concrete floor to slam into the opposite wall.

Lancelot looked up to attack the other two emplacements just in time to see the rest of Omicron move in. Blockhouse slammed a right cross into the weapon facing him, while Gunny came in and smashed the emplacement opposite him with a bolt of mental force.

“Good,” General Travis’s voice said over the PA system in the shooting house. “Teamwork and aggression. That’s what I like to see.”

“All right, team,” Gunny said. “Let’s go back to the start and give the techies time to clean this place up. We run again in thirty.”

“Why?” Lancelot said. “You said it yourself, we have this little drill down. There are other productive ways to use our time than training in a shooting house.”

Gunny was in his face in an instant. “Now, you listen to me, soldier. The general wants us to run this house again and again until the reactions are instinctive. Where you don’t think about the enemy, you just react and attack.”

“So, that’s what this is about?” Lancelot said. “You think I won’t fight if we go up against the Guardians again? Is that it?”

“After you found out who it was last time,” Gunny said, “you didn’t exactly sound thrilled. So, maybe, I want to make sure whose side you’re on before we go on the line again.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Lancelot replied in a hiss. “I’ll follow any lawful orders you give me.”

Gunny nodded. “Just don’t take too long figuring out the ‘lawful’ part. I’d hate to have to pull you off the team, but I can’t have an unknown in combat. Now, get something to drink. You’ve just burned about five of your thirty.” Lancelot snapped off a parade-ground sharp salute and trudged off. Gunny stood, watching his retreating back and shaking his head. The kid was good, he knew, but he was too weak. He just wasn’t hard enough for the job. Still, he had to keep him on until Travis came up with a replacement. He just hoped that was soon.

Mike glanced up at the street sign as he turned onto the one-way street. Somehow, he’d made a wrong turn heading to Foundation headquarters, so he was left to navigate Washington’s dizzying maze of one-way streets to try and get back on track. At least he’d seen the area from ground level during the war. Without that experience, he knew he’d be hopelessly lost. As it was, he was hopefully lost. Not a big improvement, but he’d take it.

“Hey,” Lindsey said from the back seat, “I just got a really weird vibe. Take the next left.”

“What is it?” Mike asked, looking for a legal opportunity to do what Lindsey suggested. He lowered his mental shields a fraction, but it was enough to pick up the emotional vibration that Lindsey had mentioned. It had the undercurrents of fear and anger that often presaged a riot, but there was something else in it, operating on a very low level. Mike couldn’t concentrate on picking it out and drive in Washington as well.

“Lindsey,” he said, “see if you can pick that vibe apart. There’s something in there that I can’t pull out, but it’s not usual.”

“What do you mean, pull the vibe apart?” Rich said from the front passenger seat. “Can you really do that?”

“Well,” Lindsey said, “some vibes are pretty complex. If you really concentrate, you can tell the various emotions that make it up. It’s really hard for me. Mike’s better at it, but he can’t do it and drive at the same time.” She stopped talking. Mike knew she had closed her eyes to concentrate.

“Don’t go to sleep on us,” Ray said.

“She’s not,” Melissa responded indignantly, “she’s concentrating.”

“I was just kidding,” Ray responded hurriedly, “what’s eating you?”

“I didn’t like you insinuating that Lindsey’s sleeping on the job,” Melissa replied with a huff.

“I didn’t know you two were like that,” Ray shot back.

“I didn’t say that,” Melisa shrieked.

“Quiet down,” Mike said, “or I’ll put you two to sleep. If you want to be helpful, keep an eye out for any large gatherings. From what I can pick up, it’s a pretty good-sized group that’s generating the emotions. The closer I can get, the easier I can help Lindsey pick up what’s going on.” Mike suddenly saw a street going off to the left. Mike cut in his blinker and cut the wheel sharply, barely making the turn and setting off a storm of horns honking in his wake.

“We’re getting closer,” Lindsey said. “Ahead and on the right.” Her voice was monotone, almost as if she were hypnotized. “It is a large group, with a lot of pent up anger and a strong undercurrent of fear. There’s also something else, a carrier wave of sort, as if a metahuman telepath or empath is feeding the anger and fear.”

“I was afraid of that,” Mike said. “We’ve got a rabble-rouser. Keep your eyes out, gang. This guy is going to be getting a visit from us in our other identities, and I want to know who we’re going after.”

“How do you know it’s a guy?” Melissa said.

“The vibe is strong and harsh,” Lindsey said. “It has a definite male feel. A woman in the same role would feel very differently.” She took a deep breath. “Whoa, that was the deepest I’ve been under. It was pretty scary; that’s a really nasty vibe.”

“Thanks,” Mike said. “I couldn’t have done it and kept us on the road.”

“Two o’clock,” Rich called out, pointing to the right. A large group of people had gathered around a street-corner, just standing and looking towards the center of the group. Mike could see a man’s head barely peeking above the crowd. That contact was enough for Mike to reach out for his mind.

“Holy shit,” Mike yelled from the shock of the contact. He spun the wheel in his shock, and he had to correct almost instantly to avoid a collision. As it was, the motorist he almost hit laid on his horn, causing the crowd to part to see what had happened, which gave Rich a good look at the man in the center of the crowd.

“No way,” Rich said. “It’s the Reverend!”

“Things just got a lot worse,” Mike said. “We’ve got to get to Foundation HQ pronto. Carpenter’s got to know about this.”

Carpenter shook his head, a gesture that made him look extremely old. “So, now, on top of everything else that’s going on, we have a metahuman rabble-rouser around that is stirring up anti-metahuman hysteria?”

“Something like that,” Mike replied, “yes.”

“And this guy has no idea what he is?”

“The Reverend?” Rich snorted. “Give me a break. He’s so caught up in his damn ‘crusade’ that he probably doesn’t understand why those people don’t just follow him.”

“Rich’s right,” Mike added. “The Reverend is in major denial about what he is. If we try to tell him that what he does is the result of metahuman powers, he wouldn’t believe us. In fact, it would make him even more irrational, hard as that is to believe. So, we can’t defuse him, and we can’t arrest him yet.”

“I’ll put out an alert to DC police to keep an eye out for this guy,” Carpenter said. “As you said, there’s nothing that we can do about him right now, but I don’t want to let him get too big a base organized before we do anything about it.”

“Be careful,” Mike warned, looking Carpenter in the eye to emphasize his point. “If they try to arrest him, they may well end up under his spell. When we need to take him down, it will need to be Mindstar and Mind Mistress; anyone else is vulnerable to his powers. Make sure they know they’re dealing with a telepath.”

“So noted,” Carpenter said with a decisive nod. “Now on to more pressing business. I’ve done some checking around about a certain senator that’s giving me a lot of trouble recently.”

“What kind of trouble?” Lindsey asked. “Threatening you?”

Carpenter laughed. “Oh no, nothing so overt. No, he’s been blocking any legislation we’re behind in the Senate, and he’s been trying to get the Foundation transferred from Justice to Defense.”

“We’re heroes, not soliders,” Melissa exclaimed.

“Not that there’s a distinction,” Carpenter growled, “but I argued that the Foundation was set up primarily as a law-enforcement body, not as a military or intelligence operation. I think that his plans to transfer us are stymied, but Callaghan’s the kind who doesn’t give up easy and he does hold grudges.”

“So, he set up a military meta-team?” Rich asked.

Carpenter nodded. “I’ve been able to find out about a series of ‘medical’ tests they administered to everyone in the military about the same time as Callaghan began making noises about needing metahumans for ‘national security’. I haven’t been able to get at the results, but I think it’s a safe bet that they found at least a few with enough power to be useful.”

“What does Callaghan have to do with all of this?” Ray asked. “Is he a committee chair or something?”

“Intelligence,” Carpenter snorted. “He’s managed to get his fingers into some pies that only barely relate to that in the past year or so. He’s ambitious as hell, driven enough to be manic, and charming when he wants to be. But, like I said before, he has a problem with grudges. We are now officially on his ‘trouble’ list, so he’s been making things interesting. Budget is coming up in a few weeks, and he’s been making noises about cutting our funding in order to ‘improve efficiency’.”

Mike snorted. “Classic bureaucrat. If you can’t beat ‘em, cut ‘em. So, what does this have to do with the military?”

“One of the pies that Callaghan has his finger in is military intelligence. One of the tidbits that I’ve been able to uncover is that Callaghan has been seen in the company of one Brigadier General Walker Travis.” Carpenter handed them a photograph of Travis, a clean-cut Caucasian man in his late forties or early fifties in an immaculate Army dress uniform with a fairly significant number of medals. “Travis is DIA, Defense Intelligence Agency.”

“So?” Rich asked. “If Carpenter has military intelligence, shouldn’t he be around the DIA command?”

Carpenter shook his head. “Travis isn’t DIA command. Command is an Air Force Major General, Bridgette Laughlin.” Laughlin’s picture showed a woman about Travis’s age, with a hatchet face, steely eyes, and a much larger number of medals. “She’s done about twice as much work as Travis to get one grade higher. She’s top flight. I’ve worked with her on occasion.”

“Callaghan’s using Travis to undermine Laughlin,” Mike said.

Carpenter nodded. “Right in one. I’ve had some people go back and pull minutes from the Intelligence Committee hearings where DIA was involved. It seems there is a pattern there. If DIA has something to crow about, Travis is the one called. Laughlin is always ‘unavailable’. But, if DIA is going to be called on the carpet, Laughlin is always the one that gets the call.”

“That’s not fair,” Lindsey said, shock plainly registering on her face.

“It’s not supposed to be,” Ray said. “It’s supposed to make Travis look competent, and Laughlin look like an incompetent that got the job because she’s a woman.”

“Callaghan’s work,” Carpenter said. “Another pattern: if any female senators get appointed to Intelligence, they get stuck doing scut-work for the committee and Callaghan never recognizes them during meetings. He’s a real misogynist.”

“Good thing Terry’s hors de combat for this one,” Mike said. “She’s love to introduce Senator Callaghan to her own version of ‘girl power’.”

Carpenter laughed. “I’d pay to see that, but not yet. For now, he’s the gatekeeper to this military meta-team we have to hunt down. Now, I’ve arranged a meeting with him this afternoon to talk about some ‘disturbing developments.’ He knows that his team failed, so I’ll let him think I’m fishing about that. I am fishing, but Mike will be there with me to catch anything that bubbles up.”

Mike nodded. “I’ve got a suit in the car.”

Carpenter nodded. “Get changed. The rest of you can head over to the hotel and freshen up. Be back here in three hours. By then, Mike and I should be back and I expect to have some things to work from then.”

Callaghan’s secretary fit the mold that Mike had envisioned: peroxide blonde hair, a figure courtesy of a plastic surgeon, and nothing between the ears. “Senator Callaghan will see you now,” she said with a saccharine smile.

“Thank you,” Mike said. Carpenter just brushed past and strode into Callaghan’s office.

“Mister Carpenter,” Senator Callaghan said, “so good to see you.”

“Thank you, Senator,” Carpenter said. “This is my aide, Special Agent Marcus.”

“Agent,” Callaghan said. He didn’t extend his hand.

“Senator,” Mike replied with a nod of his head.

“I assume that you’d not try something so droll as to bring one of your telepathic minions,” Callaghan said as he motioned them to two overstuffed chairs.

“Actually,” Carpenter said, “most of my staff are not metahumans. Most have been working with me since before the Coup. As you are well aware, we have a great many functions besides simply supporting the Guardians.”

“Yes, very well,” Callaghan said. “What can I do for you today? I am quite busy.”

“Well,” Carpenter said, “as I said, the Foundation has a great many functions besides the Guardians. Investigating reports of suspicious metahuman activity is one of those functions. Another is the training of young metahumans in the use of their powers in a socially responsible manner.”

“Yes, the two terrors from Ohio,” Callaghan said. “Please get to the point.”

Carpenter smiled, letting the barbs slide off of him. “While on that mission, the team encountered a group of metahumans that were trying to abduct the children. Now, normally this would not be of interest to one such as yourself except that the metahumans identified themselves as federal agents. Now, I know that they did not answer to me. I was wondering if you knew anything about this?” Mike latched on to Callaghan’s mind. He didn’t probe deep; he needed to be aware of what was going on in the conversation. Still it was enough to give him a peek at Callaghan’s surface thoughts.

“No, I do not,” Callaghan replied, “although it would be interesting, I’m sure.” Callaghan suppressed his fear at exposure quickly, but not quickly enough.

“He’s lying,” Mike thought to Carpenter. “He was involved, and he’s scared we have something.”

“Oh, really?” Carpenter said. “Mindstar was one of the operative on the team that rescued the children. His report makes for some interesting reading. Would you like a copy?” Mike opened his briefcase.

“No, that’s quite all right,” Callaghan replied. His voice was still strong and confident, but Mike could feel the fear just below the surface. This guy is one heck of an actor, Mike conceded. “I have enough to read just keeping up with the legislation in committee.”

Mike shut the briefcase. “I’m sorry to hear that,” Carpenter said. “But, I’ll summarize, to prove my point. Mindstar asserts in the report that the metahuman team was military in precision and tactics, and that the leader was addressed by a military sobriquet. Now, considering your ties to military intelligence, I find this quite interesting.”

“General Laughlin has never informed me that DIA is involved in such a team.” Callaghan’s voice held a strong note of righteous indignation.

“Half-true,” Mike thought, “Laughlin doesn’t know they exist; Travis does, though. He’s the go-between.”

“Well, as you said,” Carpenter replied, “you are a busy man. If you could please let me know where to find Generals Laughlin and Travis, I’ll be on my way.”

“General Laughlin works out of the Pentagon, as does General Travis,” Callaghan said. “I’ll have the secretary give you their contact information.”

“Bingo,” Mike thought. “He thought very clearly, ‘keep them away from Meade’. That’s a major military intelligence post, if I remember right. That must be where the team is based.”

“Thank you, senator,” Carpenter said. “Was there anything you wanted to ask us while we’re here?”

“Well,” Callaghan said, a slight smile creeping onto his face, “there was one matter. Those hostages, the one the Guardians ‘rescued’ in Texas. They have still not been released. What is their prognosis?”

Carpenter let his face fall into the appropriate half-grieving half-embarrassed look. “Well, unfortunately, not good. Their captors had access to some very advanced mental manipulation techniques. What at first appeared to be just a mass case of Stockholm syndrome is, in fact, something far more significant. We have, as you know, brought in the best psychiatrists at treating Stockholm syndrome, but their techniques and medications have had no significant effect. Whatever their captors used, it could affect a complete reprogramming of personality in a remarkably short period of time. It could be used to make someone do almost anything. Since you’ve taken an interest in the case, I’ll make sure you are sent regular reports.”

“Thank you,” Callaghan said. “I must say, I would like to speak to these experts myself.”

“I’ll be sure to put you in touch with them.”

“Got something interesting,” Mike thought. “An image popped up when you made that comment about someone doing anything. I’ll tell you later.”

“Well, if that is all, I’m very busy, so I must bring this to an end. It’s been a pleasure, gentlemen.”

Carpenter nodded, but didn’t attempt to shake Callaghan’s hand. Callaghan didn’t offer his hand either. “Thank you for your time, senator.”

“A what?”

“A woman,” Mike said. He and Carpenter had been back at the Foundation long enough to get out of their suits, and the other four Guardians had joined them in one of the conference room for a debriefing. “It was just a brief image, but I will recognize her face if I see her again.”

“Why would he think of a woman based on that statement?” Carpenter said.

“Is she his wife?” Lindsey asked.

“I don’t think so,” Mike replied. “In fact, I think she may be his weakness. If she were a mistress of some sort, the revelation of that relationship would really hurt his career. Probably not kill it, the way things are now, but definitely hurt it. I believe that his thought path was along the lines of, ‘maybe she was coerced.’ I’m not sure about the rest.”

“What if she was?” Rich said. “You saw how the girls were when we got back from that ship. If those aliens used the same chemicals on a normal person, they’d be some kind of nymphomaniac. That would be the perfect type of person to use to corrupt a guy with a lecherous streak.”

“Rich’s right,” Ray said. “It makes a lot of sense.”

“Are these aliens perverts or what?” Melissa said, making a face. “I mean, that’s just gross.”

Mike nodded. “Gross, but effective. Callaghan is a powerful senator, and he also has a reputation for being both a ladies’ man and a misogynist. His biggest weakness is between his legs. And, yes, Melissa, these aliens do seem to have sex on the brain. That may be their weakness.”

“What do you mean?” Carpenter said. “I know a lot of people in this town that would do a lot of things for sex.”

“Yeah,” Mike said. “But people who know what love is can overcome that power easily. We just have to find these aliens before they can do much more damage.”

“Granted,” Carpenter answered. “Okay, here’s the plan. I want you on rotating shifts outside of Callaghan’s townhouse. My contacts in the Secret Service tell me that he keeps his security detail well away from there. My guess is that that’s where he’s meeting this mistress. I’ll get in touch with some contacts at Fort Meade and find out just what’s going on with this team of Callaghan’s. If we get lucky, we can find something on Callaghan that will get him to come clean.”

“Or give us a lead on those aliens,” Mike replied. “Okay, Melissa, you and I are on the first shift. Lindsey, you and Ray get some rest. You’ll relieve us in two hours. Let’s move.”

Barkaz fought hard to keep his irritation under control. These ‘suits’ that these Terrans wore were remarkably confining, and most itched terribly. When the fleet got here, he would make sure that they would dress in something more appropriate. He also

wondered why he hadn't just landed on some island near the equator and worked outward from there. From the video broadcasts that he'd seen, they were much more agreeable insofar as dress was concerned.

He was also irritated at Callaghan. The man's self-important smugness and refusal to play his part adequately grated on Barkaz's nerves. Callaghan was trying to explain his interview with this Carpenter and subtly inquire about the process that had produced Marka all at the same time, with poor results.

"The process we used on the experimental subjects was similar, yes," Barkaz said, "but Marka is actually a descendent of the ones actually exposed. The agent that produced the change has not been active for years."

"Well," Callaghan said, "they're still treating it as some kind of psychological conditioning. If it's physical in nature, they're on the wrong track."

"Oh, yes," Barkaz replied, "the change does involve physical changes to neural pathways and other areas, so purely psychological 'treatment' will not work. What else did they inquire about?"

"He was fishing for info on the team that ran into the Guardians in Ohio," Callaghan replied. "I didn't give them anything, but somehow they found out about Travis. That could complicate things."

"How so?" Barkaz asked, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper.

"Without some kind of military commander on the team," Callaghan replied coolly, "we'll have a harder time taking control of the existing military forces. If we can show the military one of their own that knows what's what, we stand a better chance of converting them en masse rather than having to deal with them in other ways."

Barkaz nodded. His kind was no good at war. Some were fine warriors, but they lacked the stomach for mass warfare. It was such a waste of good genetic material. Still, they had means of handling that kind of problem. It had come up before. "Do we need to accelerate the timetable?"

Callaghan actually stuttered. "N-no," he said, "I think we-we'll be all right." Callaghan took a deep drink of the coffee from the cup on his desk. Barkaz had seen him put something else into the cup from a bottle, but he couldn't be sure of what it was. Whatever it was, it steadied Callaghan's nerves. "I'll just have to look to disposing of the Guardians ahead of schedule. I just need an excuse."

"Excellent," Barkaz said. Now for the sinker. "You said you had another matter you wished to discuss."

“Another visit,” Callaghan said, “tonight. Marka is extraordinary. I need her more and more. It’s like she’s some kind of drug.”

“The visit will be arranged,” Barkaz replied. He thought, but did not say, “that is the general idea.”

Mike snapped the Ford’s gearshift into park with a quick push on the stick, and then killed the engine. The Crown Victoria’s had become ubiquitous in government service over the past few years, both local and federal. This one, in a dark navy blue, wouldn’t strike anyone as a possible unmarked police car, and it would be dark enough to blend into the background as night came without obviously appearing to do so. They would be inconspicuous, which was the point in surveillance.

The townhouse was in one of Washington’s posh neighborhoods. The street was lined with townhouses on both sides, with trees in abundance. The townhouse they had parked in front of belonged to one of the Foundation senior staff that had made a substantial fortune in business before enlisting in the Foundation just before the war. He had been discreetly ordered to come home very late tonight, and had complied after it was mentioned that Senator Callaghan was considered to be under a metahuman threat. Mike smiled slightly at the thought. The threat to the Senator may not be strictly human, but he wasn’t ready to accept that the aliens had metahuman powers themselves. They were probably just highly advanced and more than a little perverse.

“So, what, we just sit here?” Melissa groused from the passenger seat. “How boring.”

“Surveillance duty isn’t exciting, that’s for sure,” Mike said. “It’s an hour and a half of sheer boredom waiting for thirty minutes of excitement. The only problem is that you never know when that half-hour is going to be. So, we’ll watch in fifteen-minute shifts. I’ll take the first one.”

“Do you have to be so organized?” Melissa groaned. “Shifts here, watches there, fifteen minutes, two hours, eight hours. Doesn’t it ever get boring?”

“Perfect planning prevents poor performance,” Mike said, smiling at the memory of Golden Guardian as she drilled that into his teenage head. “Or, to reverse it, poor planning prevents perfect performance.”

“Now you sound like Jake,” Melissa whined. “You two must have gone to the same school of boring.”

Mike chuckled. “No, not exactly, but close.” His eyes never left the front of Callaghan’s townhouse.

Melissa was silent for a moment, until the pause became pregnant. “So, can I ask you something?”

“Shoot,” Mike replied.

“Why did you pair up with me? I thought that Lindsey and I would make a better pair.”

“Or, you mean that you would rather have Ray sitting with me than with Lindsey?” Mike replied.

“I didn’t say that,” Melissa huffed.

“But you thought it,” Mike replied. “And, no, I didn’t scan you. I didn’t have to. It was all in your voice.”

Mellisa snorted, but fell silent.

“Besides,” Mike went on, “if Ray tried anything, Lindsey would give him the telepathic equivalent of a knee to the nuts. She’s totally in love with Jake, and I think she’s finally gotten through to him. She won’t jeopardize that by sleeping around.”

“I,” Melissa said in a small voice, “I’m just so afraid of losing him because I’m a freak.”

“Nonsense,” Mike said sharply. “So you feed on sonic energy. Big deal, especially when compared to him. You can just hook into some headphones and you’re set. Ray has to feed from someone who will allow him to drain life force. Either that, or steal life force to survive. It sounds to me like he needs you far more than you need him. He’s the one who ought to be jealous.”

“I, I guess,” Melissa stuttered. Mike could almost hear her trying to get her mind around the concept of Ray needing to be jealous of her, and she was having trouble. “I’ll just charge up, if you don’t mind.” She plugged a pair of headphones into a portable CD player, put the plugs into her ears, and let her eyes close.

“No problem,” Mike thought.

After his watch was up, he woke Melissa by the simple expedient of unplugging her headphones from the player. She woke up, looked abashed at being out so long, and nodded that she would take watch. Mike then sat back in the seat, closed his eyes, and began to meditate. It would clear and focus his mind, giving him his maximum power if they needed it.

Marka kept her head down in an obedient pose as Tiero drove her through the human city. She wanted desperately to look up, to look around, to take in the strange sights of this world, but she knew that that way led only to pain and death. She was supposed to be a simple servant, devoid of things like curiosity and wonder. She knew only pleasure and pain. She was to be an instrument of pleasure and pain. Tiero would tell her which.

“Please him, Marka,” Tiero said in their tongue. “Do not worry. After this, the human fool will undergo the change, and then he will have to seek out his own mate. If he asks, tell him that our fellow travelers will arrive in seven standard days. He will undergo the change two days before then.”

“Yes, Tieros,” Marka said in the properly obedient tone. She had a lot of practice at acting calm and obedient when her mind was racing. She had deduced who the “fellow travellers” were, and she knew that she had to tell someone. She just did not know whom yet.

“Mike, wake up.” Melissa’s forceful shaking of his arm did as much to wake him as her melodious voice. “Somebody just drove up.”

Mike blinked his eyes, awake and aware in an instant. Feigning indifference, he glanced over at Callaghan’s house. Sure enough, Callaghan’s BMW sports car was pulling into the main drive. Callaghan got out of the driver’s side with a large package in one arm.

“What is that?” Melissa asked.

“A bottle of wine, if I had to guess,” Mike replied. “He’s probably trying to impress the girl. Either that, or he needs some dutch courage.”

Melissa giggled. “Imagine that. Mister Big Shot needs to get sauced before he gets in the sack.”

Mike chuckled. “It does have a nice touch of irony.” He glanced over at the clock, noting the time. “Okay, you’ve still got another five minutes. Since I’m up, I’ll watch with you until it’s time for my shift. Ray and Lindsey won’t relieve us for another hour.”

“Wow,” Melissa said, “now I’m fired up. I wonder when she’ll get here.”

Mike looked down the street. “This may be her now.” A black Cadillac sedan pulled up in front of Callaghan’s house. The driver opened his door, got out, and opened the rear door on the driver’s side. As the passenger got out, cloaked in a trench coat, Mike got a glimpse of long, honey-blond tresses flowing over the shoulders. The passenger turned around, as if looking around, and Mike saw her face.

“It’s her,” he said in an almost breathless whisper.

“Whoa,” Melissa said. “You never said she was that gorgeous.”

Mike couldn’t answer that. He had known the image was gorgeous, and overlaid with all sorts of lustful thoughts in Callaghan’s mind, but he had to see it to believe it. The features were perfect: brilliant blue eyes set just far enough apart, a nose that was just the

right shape, round cheeks, all contained in flawless skin that carried just enough tan to look healthy without any of the tell-tales of overexposure.

Some rational part of Mike's mind knew that he should try and establish telepathic contact with the girl, so that he could keep track of her mind in the house and to eavesdrop on what she and Callaghan were doing. He could also delve into her memories to find out when she had been taken by the aliens and transformed. Unfortunately, the part of Mike's mind that was in control right now had little use for such rationality and logic. It was the part that he had absorbed completely in the battle for Washington, in order to access its power. Now, it was in control, at least to the point of preventing him from doing anything constructive.

"Hey, Earth to Mike," Melissa said. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Mike said. "I'll be fine. I'll be all right in a minute."

Marka glanced back across the street as Tiero let her out of the vehicle. She knew that she had to escape; she knew that she had to tell someone what was coming. The only problem was that she knew very little of these people's language. She knew the words for the things this Callaghan asked her to do, and enough to get by otherwise, but not enough to convey her message. She needed to find special help.

When she looked, her eyes fell on the vehicle parked across the street. Two pairs of eyes watched her. One was male, and the other female. Both watched her with the looks she had seen before; eyes wide, mouths open slightly, unable to comprehend the person before them. She was only now beginning to realize how rare she must look on this planet.

Suddenly, she remembered the male's face. She had seen it on some papers on Barkaz's work desk. He was some form of threat to them. If he was a threat to Barkaz, he may be a help to her. She just wished she could remember his name. Still, it was her best hope.

Mike fought to control his anxiety. His foot wanted to tap on the floor, his hands wanted to twitch, his mind wanted to spend an eternity in the memory of her eyes. Instead, he tried to meditate. Every time her face came back to his mind, he pushed it down by pulling Terry's face up from memory. The advantage he had was that he could pull up an infinite variety of Terry. Sometimes he thought of her with her hair pulled back, her mask on, her face determined and resolute. Other times, he saw her with her hair mussed, her face smudged and bruised, sometimes bloody, after they had fought and won the battle. After she fought, she always had that glint in her eyes, that edge of desire, that he responded to instinctively. At first, he remembered how intrigued he was by her reaction to using her powers. Now, he just accepted it as part of her makeup.

The favorite images, the ones he dredged up when he felt his will slipping, were the ones of her first thing in the morning. Her hair was mussed, her eyes cloudy with sleep, but she never looked more beautiful to Mike. Those were always the ones that bought him the most peace.

“Heads up,” Melissa said, interrupting his latest attempt at meditation, “someone’s coming out.”

Mike turned around. The front door was standing wide open. A figure appeared in the door. Mike could see gold hair; it was her. She held her trench coat to her chest rather than wearing it. She glanced behind her once, quickly, and then she took off towards them. The trench coat was slowing her slightly, as were her bare feet as soon as she hit the street surface. Mike knew that it wasn’t a coincidence that she was running their way. She must have seen them on the way in and guessed that they were watching Callaghan.

Mike managed to open his door, get out, and open the rear door smoothly, as if he was expecting her. As she approached, he scanned her, to get a reading on why she was running, and what she’d done to Callaghan. His first touch almost shocked him out of her mind: she wasn’t thinking in English. In fact, she wasn’t thinking in any language that Mike recognized. He pushed deeper, below the level of language, and he could discern what she was trying to say.

“Please, help me,” she said, in halting English with a lilting accent.

“Of course,” Mike said, feeding her the translation in her mind. “Get in.” He helped her into the back seat, shut the door, and got back in the front.

“Hi, I’m Melissa,” Melissa said.

“Marka,” the girl said.

“She doesn’t speak much English,” Mike said as he fired up the Ford, dropped it into gear, and took off.

“Where are you from?” Melissa asked.

Marka made some confused sounds, so Mike translated for her in Marka’s mind.

“Beytraska,” Marka said in a small voice.

“I’m not familiar with that,” Melissa said.

“You shouldn’t be,” Mike said. “It’s not from around here.”

“As in,” Melissa said, her eyebrows raised as she realized the answer before she asked.

“As in not from this planet,” Mike said. He translated for Marka. She nodded her head, keeping it down, her chin almost resting on her sizeable chest, which the trench coat barely covered.

General Travis looked over Omicron. They sat alert, their numbers dwarfed by the size of the briefing room that could seat two hundred easily. They were tired, he knew, but they were ready. They had been training relentlessly. Now, it was time to find out if it had all been worth it.

“At 1700 hours today, operatives of the Foundation, possibly Guardians, kidnapped a female staff member of Senator Callaghan outside his townhouse in Washington, DC. Our intelligence is that the woman is being held in Foundation headquarters in Washington, possibly for interrogation. Due to the Foundation’s status as a law enforcement agency, other law enforcement agencies have refused to become involved. Therefore, we have been called in.

“The Guardians have gone too far. They think that they are above the law. It is our job to disabuse them of that notion. Omicron will enter Foundation headquarters, remove the hostage, and deal with any opposition with extreme prejudice. Floor plans of the complex are posted here.” Travis pointed behind him. Six separate floor plan sheets had been posted. Each depicted one floor of Foundation headquarters, from the basement to the fifth floor. “You are free to devise any means of entry and clearance that you desire. Based on our intelligence, we have placed the approximate location of the hostage here.” He tapped the fifth floor map over a small room that read “Secure.” “We can not affirmatively confirm that, because this room is shielded from all outside access, and it is also insulated from the structure, so that no vibrations travel through the structural members. Now, are there any questions?”

Gunny raised his hand. “Sir, how many of the Guardians are on scene?”

“Unknown,” Travis said, “but we have confirmed sightings of four at an incident in Denver. Those at that incident are: Crimson Knight, Firemane, Techno, and Wind Shear. At worst, you will face six Guardians.”

Lancelot raised his hand. “Do we know why they kidnapped the woman?”

Travis shook his head. “Also unknown. We can only assume that they are seeking some form of information to discredit Senator Callaghan, who has been a political thorn in their side.” Lancelot didn’t look happy with that answer, but he sat back when Gunny fixed him with a glare.

“All right,” Travis said. “Get geared up and in the parking garage in thirty. Good luck.”

“Atten-SHUN!” Gunny barked out, snapping to attention. The rest of the team followed suit, parade ground perfect. Travis smiled. They could take those blasted Guardians any day of the week.

In the secure room of Foundation headquarters, the Guardians and Carpenter gathered around Marka. She had pulled the trench coat on, covering her body, but her face held them enraptured just the same. Melissa stared at Ray’s face, and Ray tried to keep his open-mouthed lust from showing. Rich, likewise, could barely keep his expression composed. Lindsey was trying to stay composed, but she was having trouble screening out the lustful background energy of the room. Mike kept his emotions in check by only the barest of margins, but it was enough to allow him to translate accurately Carpenter’s questions and Marka’s responses.

“So, let me get this straight,” Carpenter said. “You came over on a spaceship with a small crew.”

“Eight,” Marka thought in reply, which Mike translated. “Eight males. More females.”

“Eight,” Carpenter repeated. “How do your people invade a planet with so few fighters?”

“Not fighters,” Marka corrected. “We use robots to fight. We try to be friends. We take some local people hostage, to find out if we are compatible with them, and to find out what we look like to them. If we are attractive, we try and convince some of their leaders that we can make them look like us.”

“So, you offer them beauty?” Melissa asked, aghast at the thought. “People fall for that?”

“Yes,” Marka said. “Many people, males and females, will give up everything to be beautiful.”

“Makes sense,” Rich snorted. “Look at what people pay for plastic surgery and look-good pills now.”

“We do not use surgery,” Marka said. “Instead, we give people a liquid.” Mike saw an image of a man suckling from a fake breast, but he kept that to himself. “The liquid transforms their bodies. It also transforms their minds.”

“Making them extremely aroused and servile,” Lindsey said. “That sounds like the gas they used on us, except our bodies didn’t change.”

“The gas is a restraint,” Marka said. “It is used on females that resist a male or a male’s instructions. It makes her very willing and very needy. Few females can resist its effects.”

“Powerwoman did,” Melissa said. “It didn’t affect her.”

“Wrong,” Mike said. “It affected her, but not in the normal way. She was pregnant.”

Marka gasped. “You let a female with child fight?”

Mike answered her in her mind. “We did not know that she was with child.”

A sharp buzzing interrupted the conversation. “Wait just a moment,” Carpenter said. He strode over to a wall panel and pushed an indentation. A panel slid out with a telephone on it. Carpenter hit the speakerphone key. “I told you I was not to be disturbed,” he said sharply.

“Yes, sir,” his secretary’s voice replied, “but you did say that you wanted me to forward any calls from Lieutenant Chaplain at Fort Meade.”

“Thank you,” Carpenter said. “Put him through.” The phone was silent for a moment, and then the click came that indicated the call transfer. “Hey, Chappie,” Carpenter said, his jovial tone only slightly masking the tension he felt, “what’s up?”

“Not much, sir,” Chaplain replied. His voice was low and brusque, as if he was trying to make the phone call without anyone noticing. “You said you wanted a heads-up on anything unusual. Well, one of our vans was just requisitioned by General Travis’s office for something in town. Normally, they put in requests a week or so ahead of time, by the book. This one was the spur of the moment, and they were really insistent.”

“How big of a van?” Carpenter asked, his eyes looking right at Mike, who looked back calmly.

“One of our panel vans, the ones without windows. We use ‘em mostly for cargo work, so they don’t have seats. If you were using it for people, you could fit seven or eight, but they’d be sitting on the seat rails.”

“Thanks, Chappie,” Carpenter said. “That’s good to know.”

“No problem, sir,” Chaplain replied. “Always happy to help out the Guardians, even if it’s in a little way.”

“I’ll make sure and pass that on,” Carpenter said. “Maybe, if they pay a visit to Meade, I’ll have them sign something for you or something.”

“Wow, that would be great,” Chaplain exulted. “Listen, I have to get back to work.”

“I’ll get with you later,” Carpenter said. “Thanks again.” He clicked the speakerphone button, closing the connection. His face was determined, as frozen as if he had been chiseled out of granite. “They’re coming here.”

Mike nodded. "Safe bet. We knew this could happen."

Carpenter turned back to the phone. He hit the speakerphone button and dialed a short numeric combination. "Now here this," he said. They could hear his voice echoing from the public address system outside. "Now here this. We have information that a terrorist force has targeted this facility. All personnel are hereby directed to leave this facility. You will be contacted when it is safe to return to work. This is Director Brian Carpenter speaking." He cut the phone off.

"Were you talking about terrorists?" Rich asked. "I thought it was that bunch of jarhead metas we ran into before."

"It was," Mike said. "That just clears the building without too many questions. Lots of terrorists would take a shot at the Foundation without a second thought, so it makes a convenient cover story."

"It should also buy us a little time," Carpenter said. "They'll be expecting civilian staff to be here. When they're not, they'll realize they're made and move slower, more cautiously. We have to turn that to our advantage."

"How can we do that?" Melissa asked, her voice rising. "They're solidier, they're trained for this."

"They may be soldiers," Mike said, "but we're heroes. There's a difference. Time to show them that."

"You'll need to get dressed," Carpenter said. "Wouldn't want you going into action looking like that."

"Uh," Lindsey said, "my uniform is back at the hotel." Melissa and Ray looked similarly sheepish.

"Don't worry," Carpenter said. He strode over to another blank wall panel. When he clicked on a button on the next panel over, a section of wall as tall as a person opened up. Inside, they could see a rack of costumes: their costumes. "We always keep spares here, just in case."

"You heard the man," Mike said, "get prepped. We don't know how long we have."

"Is this about me?" Marka asked in her broken, but still beautiful, English.

"Yes," Mike said, replying both mentally and vocally. "Callaghan has sent people to take you back to him and to your people."

She looked down at the floor, silent for a moment. "Will I have to go?" she asked in a very small, very scared voice.

“No,” Lindsey said. She walked over to Marka, put her hands on both sides of the woman’s face, and brought Marka’s gaze to hers. She also spoke into Marka’s mind, using the same technique she had seen Mike using. “We will not let them take you back. We can stop these people, and we will.”

Mike nodded. “She is right. We will not let them take you back unless you want to go back.”

Marka sighed. “I do not want to go back, but I am not worth fighting over.”

“Nonsense,” Lindsey said. “Underneath all of that conditioning or whatever, you are still a person, or whatever. Anyone, no matter how different, is worth fighting for.”

Marka’s eyes began to cloud. “You, you really mean that?”

Lindsey nodded. “Yes, we do.”

“Thank you,” Marka said, almost choked up. “Thank you. I have never been told I was worth anything before.”

“That is one more reason we have to stop these people,” Mike said. “If we don’t, more people will become like you.”

Lancelot tugged on his gloves, making sure they were tight. At least, he told himself that. In reality, he knew he was fidgeting, trying to burn off nervous energy. He had tried to meditate, find peace within himself. Before, it had always worked like his sensei had instructed him. Now, though, he could find no peace.

It wasn’t the bouncing of the van. The shocks were stiff, yes, and it did bounce quite a bit on the not-well-maintained roads. However, he had always been able to meditate in a vehicle, from an airplane to a helicopter to an APC to a Humvee. It wasn’t the close proximity of the rest of the team. That had likewise never bothered him before. Now, though, it seemed as if every breath, every grunt, every shift of the air kept his focus distracted, distant.

“Heads up,” Gunny said. He, like the rest of them, was dressed in black combat fatigues, with balaclavas pulled back row, ready to be pulled up for entry. “We’ve just been notified that the Foundation is evacuating the building. We’ve been made.”

“Why would they do that?” Lancelot asked. “They could use the civilians as hostages to slow us down.”

“Sounds like they don’t want them getting in the way,” Blockhouse rumbled. “Fine by me.” He slammed one meaty fist into the other palm.

“Here’s the plan,” Mindstar said to the assembled Guardians. “Strongarm and I are Team One, Wraith and Aria are Team Two. We move down to the lower levels of the building and fight a running battle upstairs. Mind Mistress and the White King stay here and coordinate the action. Mistress, you’ll use your telepathy to keep us apprised of what’s going on. The White King will use the building’s security systems to keep an eye on what the other guys are doing and to direct us. If they stay together, we’ll pick off stragglers until they split up to hunt us. Once they split up, we pounce on them individually. Dead is unacceptable; I just want them knocked out and secured. However, don’t expect any quarter from them. Like Aria mentioned, these are soldiers. They’re trained to kill, not to wound. Some may be more bloodthirsty than others, but most won’t give killing a second thought, so don’t get caught.”

“Who will stay with me?” Marka asked. “I, I do not like to be alone.”

“Don’t worry,” Mind Mistress said. “We’ll be working out of here, so we will be with you the whole time.”

“Any more questions?” Carpenter said. No one said anything. “Good. Teams one and two, get down to the ground floor. Stay away from doors and windows. I’ll alert you when they enter. Now, get going.”

Lancelot was still fighting to bring his breathing under control as the van pulled to a stop. “Masks up,” Gunny said. Lancelot pulled the balaclava up and over his head, hiding all of his face except for his eyes beneath its black cloth. The others did likewise. Lancelot fought the familiar, slight sensation of suffocation as the cloth cut down on his airflow.

“Get hot,” Gunny growled. Normally, this would be the signal for troops to charge their weapons. Since they were weapons themselves, they didn’t need the charging. Lancelot cracked his knuckles inside his fighting gloves, just to respond to the command. Amazon popped her elbows and wrists, while Blockhouse slammed one fist into the opposite palm a few times, like a boxer before a fight.

“Let’s move.” Gunny slid over and flung the van’s sliding door open. Amazon and Blockhouse were the first ones out, in case the Foundation tried to ambush them before they got to the building. No laser blasts or gunfire came, so they moved toward the side entrance of the building. The front half of the bottom floor was glass around the lobby/museum. They were moving towards the other half. The walls here were concrete. The door was steel, probably solid, with a small keypad entry set in the wall next to the door.

“Triton, bypass,” Gunny barked. Triton moved up to the keypad, ripped open the bottom, and set to crossing the wires there. After a few long seconds, the door buzzed and Amazon pulled it open. Blockhouse led the team inside.

“Lancelot, you’re slack,” Gunny commanded. Lancelot nodded and moved in behind Blockhouse. Gunny, Amazon and Triton fell into line behind them.

“Straight for five meters, then right at the junction,” Gunny said in a low, quiet voice that was totally unlike his usual, drill-sergeant demeanor.

“Side entrance,” White King said out loud. Mind Mistress nodded and established her telepathic links with the teams below. “Guide them to points Charlie and Delta for intercept.” He keyed up the map of the first floor on the display in front of her, so that she could see where to direct the two teams. “Team one makes the first hit.”

“Why are they coming after me?” Marka asked. She had traded in the trenchcoat for one of Melissa’s denim tops, which she promptly tied up under her breasts, and a pair of Lindsey’s jeans, which strained to contain her hips, but were too wide in the lower legs.

“They know you know too much,” White King said. “They work for Callaghan. Your leader must have told him to get you back, whatever the cost, so Callaghan uses them. Do not worry. We will stop them.”

Lancelot was starting to get spooked. He had expected the Guardians to be waiting just inside the door. He had expected them to attack head-on, may the best team win, but they had not. He could hear movement echoing in the halls, but he hadn’t seen anyone. This was not their style, at least, not that he knew.

A mumbled sound from behind him spun his head around. At first, he didn’t see anything, but then Amazon moved over to one side of the hall they were in. She was only a few feet away from a side corridor. It had been clear when he and Blockhouse had passed it, but still.

“Five, this is Two, come in,” he said into the small microphone by his mouth, under the balaclava. “Close up, over.”

There was no response from Triton. Gunny’s eyes narrowed. “Five, this is One. Close up, over.” Still no response.

“He was here just a second ago,” Amazon said. The whole exchange was very quiet. More than a few feet away, and no one would have heard anything.

“Damn,” Gunny swore. “Two, Three,” he said to Lancelot and Blockhouse, “break off and double back. Try to engage them. Four, with me.” He motioned to Amazon, who nodded and took lead.

“Where now, sir?” Blockhouse said, in a tone that left no doubt that he considered Lancelot’s rank a matter of small importance, next to his physical power.

“Split up,” Lancelot said. “Try to trap them on this floor. That will clear the way for One and Four to make the objective. Move out.”

“They’re splitting up,” Mindstar heard in his mind. He and Strongarm froze inside the office. Their prisoner was quite unconscious, thanks to Strongarm, but they couldn’t take a chance on being heard themselves. “Two are doubling back. The others are proceeding. King says Team Two will intercept the others. He wants you to take the backtrackers.”

Mike nodded. “Can you tell which one is which?”

“The big one headed to the right, from the door. The little one headed left.”

“Strongarm,” Mike thought to his companion, “you take the right. I’ll take the left. I think they’re going to try and double back, and I don’t want to get caught in between.”

Strongarm nodded. He pulled the door open slightly, glanced outside, and slipped out, with Mindstar behind him.

“Wraith,” Ray heard in his mind, “two of them are headed for the stairwell. Meet them before they get there.”

Wraith motioned quickly for Aria to follow him, and he began jogging towards the stairwell. He couldn’t run, not at full speed, and have her follow him, and he needed her with him. He would have been confident in his speed against one foe, but he couldn’t tie up two at once. Besides, he didn’t feel right without Aria around, especially not in a fight. They complemented each other too well.

If they were going to stop this team from getting past them, they had to make a stand. They weren’t going to be distracted by hit and run tactics. They had to get ahead of them and stop them at the stairwell.

They made it to the stairwell door before the intruders. They had no sooner turned to face the corridor approaching the stairs then the leader emerged, with the tall female behind him. “If you want to get to the girl,” Wraith challenged, “you’ll have to go through us.”

“Get out of our way,” the leader yelled. He charged forward. Wraith set himself on the balls of his feet, like a runner about to start, and was counting the seconds until he should move himself when an invisible wall of force slammed him aside. His breath exploded out of him as he slammed into the wall. He heard Aria’s shriek as the man blew past her as well, but only dimly over the ringing in his ears and the roar of his own lungs as he tried to get his breath back.

“Keep them off my back,” the leader called back from the stairs.

“My pleasure,” the big woman said as she strode over to Aria. “You first, bitch.”

Aria loosed a single, piercing note with the clarity and sharpness of crystal and the volume of a gunshot. The woman staggered back, her hands over her ears as Wraith got to his feet.

“All right, you big mother fucker,” Blockhouse roared at the empty halls, “come out and fight.” Rich just smiled at the fool’s rantings. He had managed to come up behind his ‘pursuer’, just by following the sound of his voice booming off of the walls.

Rich heard Blockhouse’s footsteps stop. “Come on, asshole, come out here.” Rich slipped up behind the overconfident muscle man. He stepped lightly, taking great pride in his ability, despite his size, to move quietly when he had to. Mike had insisted that all of the team be capable of stealth since their earliest days together in Dallas, and Rich had learned a lot about not making a lot of noise.

Blockhouse was scanning the corridor ahead of him, his head whipping back and forth. Rich slipped up behind him. Rich shook his head and lightly tapped Blockhouse on the left shoulder. The bulky man obediently swung around to his left, right into a left hook from Strongarm. The punch landed flush on Blockhouse’s chin, staggering him backwards.

“You know,” Strongarm said as he strode up to the staggered fighter, “if there’s one thing I hate,” he unleashed a vicious uppercut to Blockhouse’s stomach. Blockhouse was knocked off of his feet by the impact, and barely managed to stay on his knees, “it’s a damn loudmouth who’s too big for his britches.” Strongarm launched a second uppercut. This one hit Blockhouse square on the chin. Blockhouse toppled onto his back with a groan and fell unconscious.

Lancelot stopped moving as he heard Blockhouse’s rumbling threats stop in a series of meaty cracks. He turned around, intending to head back, but he didn’t move. After the first series of cracks, there was silence. Blockhouse had either defeated his opponent, or, more likely, been defeated himself. It would do Lancelot no good to go rushing to the aid of a teammate already defeated.

“They’re not your real teammates,” a male voice said in Lancelot’s mind, “just as the Guardians aren’t really your enemies.”

“Mindstar,” Lancelot called out, “show yourself. Get out of my mind.”

“I don’t want to fight you,” Mindstar replied in his mind, “but I will if I have to. You’re too honorable to buy in to that pack of lies Travis told you.”

“What about you kidnapping that girl?”

“Yes, because we didn’t kidnap her. See for yourself.” Images suddenly burst into Lancelot’s mind. He saw a girl, a beautiful girl with a trench coat wrapped around her, as if she had just grabbed it and hadn’t taken the time to put it on, running towards him. He could feel her fear, to the point of desperation, of the treatment she had received. He could also feel her faint hope that this person she was running to could take her away from the pain and the degradation.

“I,” Lancelot stammered, “I see.” He looked up, blinking his eyes clear of moisture that he almost hadn’t noticed, to see Mindstar, standing in front of him. “I see now. You, you didn’t kidnap her. You rescued her.” He stood up straighter. “Travis lied to us.” His voice was as cold and hard as tempered steel.

“They knew you were too honorable to participate otherwise,” Mindstar said. He placed as much respect in his voice as he could without sounding obsequious. “However, I also know something else about you. I know what your real mission is.”

Lancelot nodded. “Then it is time to show the rest of Omicron what that mission is.”

Wraith dodged another of Amazon’s mammoth punches by darting under her swing. He jabbed her in the back with his elbow as he ran past, but that hit was like a mosquito hitting a car’s windshield.

Aria took in a deep breath to launch another sonic blast. “Not again, songbird,” Amazon snarled. Before Aria could sing, Amazon strode forward and slapped her in the side of the jaw with her open hand. The jolt threw Aria into the wall and she crumpled to the ground.

“Oh no you don’t,” Wraith said. He turned and ran at Amazon. She turned back just in time and swung her arm out directly in Wraith’s path. Unable to stop, he hit the arm with terrible force. The blow sent him flying into the wall. He hit with a sickening crack as several ribs let go under the force. His cry of pain strangled in his throat as he fought for breath.

“Be good little metas and stay down,” Amazon taunted as she turned from them and ran up the stairs.

“Bad news,” Mind Mistress announced. “Wraith and Aria are down, probably for the count.”

Carpenter nodded. “Two of the hostiles have broken through, with no one in position to intercept the leader. Time to play my ace in the hole.” He turned from the security monitors to the telephone and punched a speed-dial setting.

Strongarm ran up to the door of the stairwell. Wraith and Aria were both slumped on the floor, several feet apart. Wraith was trying to crawl towards Aria, who was fingering her open jaw with a look of terror in her eyes.

“Is, she, hurt?” Wraith ground out. The rasp of his breathing told Strongarm that he had broken ribs, probably more than one by the way he was moving.

“Not bad,” Strongarm lied. He doubted that Aria was permanently injured, but he couldn’t be sure. “Just lie still, buddy. You’ve got some busted ribs, and they’re only going to get worse if you keep wriggling around. Don’t worry, we’ll get these guys mopped up and get you both to the Doc.”

He stood up and began running up the stairs. He figured it was the big amazon that had done this to them, and she was going to pay. Beating somebody up was one thing, but trying to cripple them was something else again.

Taking the stairs three to a bound, he caught the more cautious Amazon before she reached the third floor. “Eager to join your little friends?” she snarled as she kicked at his head.

“You sick bitch,” he growled in reply as he caught her foot and used it to unbalance her, pulling her down just in front of him. He unleashed an uppercut into her stomach that winded her. He followed it up with a left hook to the jaw that almost knocked her off of the staircase. She tried to punch him back, but her riposte lacked the power it needed to make an impact on him. He hit her with a right hook that slammed her against the outside wall. Her impact knocked plaster from the wall.

“Give it up,” Strongarm roared. Amazon replied with an attempted head butt that led her right into a headlock.

Gunny pushed open the door from the stairwell onto the sixth floor. He could hear combat below him, but he knew that he was already at the objective. The map he had memorized showed him a relatively straight path from the stairs to the secure chamber, probably for the escape of anyone there in the event of a fire or other disaster. They were about to pay the price for that convenience.

He moved forward silently, almost a shadow across the carpeted floors. No one charged at him, no weapons popped down from the ceiling or out of the walls. They must be hoping that he didn’t know where their inner sanctum was. Well, if they were hoping that, they were hoping against hope.

He approached the door that his map said should lead into the secured room. Gathering his power, he unleashed a bolt of telekinetic force. The door flew open, almost off of its hinges, at the impact. He took one stride forward into the room when the wall in front of him crackled into a video image. A woman's face, sharp to the point of being hatched-faced, with steel gray hair and steely eyes, stared out at him. He could just barely see the two gold stars of a major general gleaming from dark blue epaulets in the bottom of the image.

"Gunnery Sergeant Hightower," she boomed, "attention!" Gunny snapped to attention automatically. "This operation is hereby canceled, and you are to remand yourself to the custody of Colonel Carpenter and his personnel immediately."

"Yes, ma'am," Hightower said. He had a ton of questions, but he was too disciplined to ask them.

"This operation was illegal from the word go," General Laughlin continued. "Me, I would have tossed you into the deepest, darkest hole in ParaMax One, but Colonel Carpenter has insisted that you have been misled by my overly ambitious deputy, Travis."

"That is correct," Lancelot said as he and Mindstar came up from behind Gunny. "General Travis gave us the briefing on this operation himself."

Laughlin's expression softened when she saw Lancelot. "Time to come in from the cold, captain."

Lancelot nodded. He had already pulled down his balaclava. "Yes, ma'am."

"Come in from the cold?" Lindsey asked as she and Carpenter moved into view.

"Gunnery Sergeant Hightower here believes that I'm a corporal in the Army Infantry. In reality, I'm a Captain in Military Intelligence." Hightower's face remained stoic, but his eyebrows jumped at the revelation. "I was planted in Omicron to observe and report on Travis's 'toy.' I used my reputation as a straight-shooter to establish my bona-fides. Hightower assumed that, even though I bitched all the time, I was basically straight, so I wouldn't have a hidden agenda. I'm sorry about that, Sergeant, but I had no choice."

"Captain," General Laughlin said, "I want you to return to Fort Meade at once and place General Travis under arrest. The charges are disobedience of direct orders and the issuance of illegal orders. Colonel Carpenter, I want your team to hold the rest of Omicron in your custody until I can debrief them personally."

"General," Carpenter said, "I urgently request that you meet us at the Guardians base as soon as possible. We have some intelligence information that concerns a dramatic threat to not only national, but global security."

“What kind of threat?” Laughlin said.

“Not on an open channel,” Carpenter replied. “We’ll see you when we see you.”