

THE FOUNDATION

PART SEVEN

INVASION: PART ONE

BY

Eric Metcalf

The black velvet of space rippled, as if a stone had been tossed into a black pond. The ripples began to spread faster and faster from the center point. With a flash of light and energy, a ship erupted from the center of the distortion. Silver in color, the ship was built around a long, relatively narrow central section connecting a conical forward section to the five cylindrical thruster mountings at the rear. Thick, heavy mounts connected five tapered cylinders to the central section.

“Engage electromagnetic cloak,” Clan Leader Irkan ordered. His voice sounded languid, almost disdainful, but his bridge crew knew better. Irkan had a sharp eye for detail and he knew exactly how long each task was supposed to take.

The Defense Leader typed in a series of commands on his board. “Cloak engaged.” The skin of the ship lost its silvery luster, replaced by a black, velvety skin with spots of silver. It was indistinguishable from the star field behind it.

“Well done,” Irkan said. It was high praise, and he was sparing with it. “Communications, open a channel to Barkaz. He knew we were planned to emerge at this time.”

The air in front of Irkan’s command throne shimmered, and then a holographic image of Barkaz appeared. His hair was black instead of its usual magenta, but Irkan imagined that was a disguise. “Welcome, Clan Leader,” Barkaz said. “I trust the transit went well?”

“Terribly bumpy,” Irkan complained in the same languid voice. “I really do not realize where our navigators get their training anymore. But enough about my crew troubles. Are the inhabitants prepared to bow down to our offerings?”

“We have made, inroads,” Barkaz said hesitantly.

“Inroads?” Irkan asked. “Now, Barkaz, surely these inhabitants you said were so deliciously prudish couldn’t be so strong as to resist the wiles of your females, could they? That would be simply intolerable.”

“Oh, not all, certainly,” Barkaz said quickly, “but some have proven more, resilient, than others. We have suborned political and military leaders from one of the major world powers. This planet is horrifically balkanized, much more so than we could have imagined from our earlier information. Despite their ‘nations’ and ‘alliances’, they really are just so many clans, competing for resources and living space. The nation we have worked in is the most militarily powerful of all. They worship physical beauty while paying lip service to a deity of chastity and purity. We expect many converts to our cause.”

“So what is the problem?” Irkan asked. “Why have they not been converted?”

“There have been, complications,” Barkaz replied.

Mike waited at the door of the Foundation mansion/base as Carpenter drove up with General Laughlin in the passenger seat. Mike breathed a sigh of relief that Carpenter had been able to persuade the general to come in civilian clothes. Marka didn’t have much understanding of rank or authority, so the general’s uniform wouldn’t impress her. She was also probably not much on someone being rough and tough. That wouldn’t help them draw out the information they needed from her. Mike knew she wanted to help, could feel it throughout her thoughts, but Laughlin needed to hear this for herself.

“Mister Longstreet,” Laughlin said as she strode up, “is our guest here?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mike replied. “The rest of the team is with her in the living room. Please follow me.” Mike waited for Carpenter to join them before leading the two through the foyer into the main room. Normally, three couches and a couple of recliners ringed the room, with a coffee table in the middle and the television on the open end of the room. Now, several chairs had been brought in to Marka and the entire team, replacing the coffee table. Marka and two chairs sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by the Guardians in mufti. Ray’s chest was swathed in gauze, and Melissa’s jaw was red, but they were still present. No one wanted to miss this.

Mike had to take a breath when he walked in. The sexual tension was running so high it was explosive. Every man in the room had his eyes locked on Marka, and every woman had her eyes locked on her man. The men were awe-struck, almost to the point of being worshipful; the women were angry and disdainful. Marka had no idea of what was happening. She was just listening to the little banter going on, trying to pick up the language.

Mike glanced at Terry, sitting near the end of one couch, with Kat beside her. The end of the couch had been left open deliberately, for him. Terry was pale, much more so than Mike would have liked, and her blouse betrayed her swelling belly. He knew that he should be with her; reassure her about his love, even with this vision of beauty sitting in front of them. Sweet, innocent, irressistable.

I need to translate, he thought to her, hoping that she wouldn't hear the lie in the half-truth. He needed to be in the center of the room, all right, but it wasn't just to translate. It was also to regain control of the situation, focus everybody on something other than libido, either theirs or someone else's. He told himself that was all it was.

"All right, people," Mike announced, "everyone's here, so let's get started. First, a quick recap of what we learned from Marka in Washington. One, we are dealing with aliens here, and not just border-crossers. These aliens call themselves Beytraskans. Second, they appear human, almost too human. This is not a disguise; this is how she really looks. That means they can infiltrate human society without much trouble. Third, they have already infiltrated political and military institutions and co-opted both political and military leaders. We know about Senator Callaghan and General Travis. What we don't know is how many more are out there."

"How many aliens are we dealing with?" Carpenter asked.

Mike relayed the question to Marka. Marka looked up at him questioningly. *I don't know that many numbers..*

Mike knew the ship couldn't be that big. He also knew that Marka was, at best, poorly educated. *Show them to me*. She smiled and obediently ran through the faces of the crew of the ship. Eight of the faces were male. "Eight males, engineers and fighters," Mike said.

Marka shook her head. "No, not fighters," she said herself. Her English was broken, but her voice was so sensual as to make one forget that. "Not fight. Robots or others fight."

"Robots?" Laughlin asked.

Mike nodded. "We ran into them in Texas. They sent robot soldiers after the guys. They weren't much against us, but they could probably give regular troops a hard time."

"How many of those are on the ship?" Laughlin asked.

Marka shook her head. "She doesn't know," Mike replied. "She never was in a position to count them."

"Fair enough," Laughlin said. "What is the Beytraskan's next step? Surely they know we're on to them."

Marka's eyes grew wide. She looked at Mike, her mind open. Mike saw a massive space ship, a cluster of cylindrical pods fastened like a bunch of sticks. "Uh oh," Mike said out loud.

"Uh oh?" Carpenter asked. "You'll have to do better than that."

“Their next step,” Mike said, “is colonization. Either that, or invasion.”

Callaghan fidgeted in the back seat of Barkaz’s Cadillac. Barkaz had promised to make him a “man among men” when they had first met to discuss their alliance, and now Barkaz had said he was making good on that promise. Barkaz’s assistant drove, Barkaz was in the front passenger seat, and another gorgeous woman was in the back seat with Callaghan. Her fingers were seemingly everywhere, caressing and arousing him, keeping him distracted from where they were going.

Callaghan blinked at the green rushing past outside the windows. He had only lain back a second, to his mind, in the caresses of Barkaz’s prostitute and they had gone from downtown Washington to outside the city. He didn’t even know which direction they were going in.

“How much farther?” he asked, with his voice more of a hoarse gasp than his usual, stentorian tone.

“Only a few more minutes,” Barkaz assured him. “I would have thought the company would keep you from becoming restive.”

“I’m, not complaining,” Callaghan moaned. She was keeping him aroused enough to be uncomfortable, without allowing him any release, or even seeming to offer any. The rational part of his mind, almost swallowed by the arousal, guessed that she could keep him in this state for hours without offering release. He didn’t know where Barkaz got these girls, but he certainly wasn’t complaining.

Finally, he was dimly aware that she had stopped. As the sensations faded, he realized that they were no longer moving. They had stopped near the edge of a large field, surrounded by tall trees. He didn’t see the road they had driven in on.

“We are at our destination,” Barkaz said, in his too-precise English.

Callaghan got out of the car, praying that his legs would keep him upright. They did, with only a little help by resting his weight on the car trunk as he walked around. “There’s nothing here.”

“Nothing that you can see,” Barkaz said, smiling like the proverbial cat that ate the canary. Almost on signal, the air in the middle of the clearing began to shimmer, as if it was suddenly heated to over a hundred degrees. The images of the trees beyond the clearing rippled, as if he was seeing them through water. As the images rippled, the green and brown of the trees was replaced by a dull pink tone. Finally, the shape emerged. It was a long cylinder, the front end bulbous, tapering at the rear. It sat on three thick legs that emerged from under the center. A platform rested beneath the center at the lowest point.

“Is that a,?” Callaghan’s tongue couldn’t form the words.

“A spaceship,” Barkaz finished for him. “Yes, it is.” He took Callaghan by the arm and pulled him forward. Callaghan managed to keep his feet working, but his mind had almost shut down. He just couldn’t believe it.

Barkaz pulled him onto the platform. As soon as they stepped on, the platform rose up, smoothly and silently, into the belly of the ship. Inside, the ship was colored in muted tones, tones and roses, not the bright silvers or dull grays Callaghan would have expected from a starship. There were only a few flashing lights, and none in the familiar red-yellow-green colors.

“You mean,” he stammered out as Barkaz drug him into the ship, “you’re,”

“Aliens, I believe, is the term in your language,” Barkaz replied. “Yes. We are not from your star, nor near it. We are seekers and diplomats, searching for worlds to contact and,”

“Invade,” Callaghan said.

Barkaz laughed, a smooth, mellow sound. “No, I’m afraid not. You see, we value life too highly to risk it in such gestures. No, we prefer to win our battles with our enemies left alive to provide pleasure afterwards. You see, since we prefer not to kill our enemies, we have many ways of making enemies into allies.”

“Mind control,” Callaghan stammered out. “You’re talking about mind control, like those poor people from Texas.”

“Poor? Ha,” Barkaz snorted. “They were aged, infirm, decrepit, ill. We made them young, hale, healthy, attractive again. While none match the beauty of a native Beytraskan, they are much more than what they were. They see this as a great gift, which they repay with loyalty. Not such an unfair trade, I think.”

He pulled Callaghan into a room off of the main corridor. A series of platforms lined both walls, with a variety of strange equipment between and above the platforms. This looks like a hospital, Callaghan thought.

He started to struggle, but he didn’t have any strength. “Is that what you’re going to do to me?”

Barkaz ignored his struggles and pushed him onto one of the beds. Callaghan sank into the platform, which was smooth and cool as silk beneath him. He couldn’t find any leverage to push up. His muscles seemed to have lost all strength. Barkaz reached beside the bed and pushed something onto his face. It looked like a plastic container of some sort, with a nipple that Barkaz placed between his lips. Callaghan swallowed at the first rush of fluid. Warm and rich, it tasted like whole milk.

“Something like that,” he faintly heard Barkaz say as his hearing and sight faded. Only the cool bed and the warm liquid remained in his world. After what seemed like an eternity, even those bits of sensation faded into a warm sense of peace.

General Laughlin sipped at the rapidly cooling coffee as she tried to make sense of the jumble of information. Military intelligence was her job, but these Beytraskans made for very unusual foes. “Let me get this straight,” she said. “Your people expand by finding worlds with sentient life, infiltrating and then coopting that life by either covert infiltration or open contact. Your people chose infiltration on Earth because they were unsure of the capability of our metahumans, like the Guardians. Now, they are coming in force. Why?”

Mindstar translated for Marka. She thought a reply back. “Pride,” he said aloud. “They know that metahumans are a threat, but they think that they can use metahumans to fight metahumans. On an aside, with their biological science, they may be capable of more than just co-opting hostile metas. If they ever got their hands on any metas, they may be able to duplicate certain powers.”

“Turn normal people, or themselves for that matter, into metahumans?” Kat exclaimed. “That would be majorly uncool.”

“Definitely,” Rich added. “But if they can do that, why use Travis to control Omicron? Why not just come themselves?”

“Not enough research,” Mike replied. “I doubt they’ve had a chance to research metahuman powers. Remember, they didn’t keep any of us under wraps long enough to do any study.”

“Pride,” Marka said, her command of English growing as she overheard the long conversation. “It was not of us, so it is not good.”

“Are they that proud?” Terry asked. “That sounds pretty blind.”

“Yes,” Marka said. “They are blind. They know they are good because they made them good.”

Irkan’s languid look had dropped into a frown as Barkaz had recounted his failures, including the loss of a female. While the female herself was of no great account, knowing that aliens walked among them was damaging enough. Even though he had the one male in metamorphosis, their position was still weaker than Irkan would have liked.

“You are saying that, even with your puppet, it would be unwise to openly announce ourselves,” Irkan said. “Your first message did not mention any great threat. We have relatively few warbots. Certainly not enough to conquer a planet that size.”

“It would be unwise to be so open in any case,” Barkaz said. “I believe that stealth is our ally. Currently, if this world’s defenders went forward with what they know about us, the general populace would not believe them, and they would not prepare against us. If we move openly, we remove that protection. Instead, let us work through our puppets for the time being, and acquire new ones. With the resources of your ship, we have many more options available.”

Irkan’s eyes flashed as he looked up, some of his languor gone. “Explain, if you please.”

Marka coughed, her throat suddenly dry. Ray tried to jump to his feet, but he groaned as his ribs sawed on each other. Melissa pulled him back down, none too gently, as Jake beat Juan in a race to the pitcher of water in the back of the room. Mike was forced to grab the pitcher mentally and keep it out of harm’s way as Jake and Juan bumped heads, each trying to grab the pitcher first. Meanwhile, the girls just gasped and snorted derisively at the men’s antics.

“Decorum, kids,” Mike said with the air of a long-suffering parent, as he poured the water into a glass and brought the glass floating through the air to Marka. He set the pitcher down gracefully, but just barely. His brain was throbbing from all of the telepathy, and the telekinetic display taxed what was left of his reserves. He needed a way to draw this interview to a close.

A loud buzzing sound echoed in the suddenly quiet room. General Laughlin frowned and glared at her purse, which appeared to be the source of the noise. She fished inside and pulled out the offending cellular phone. She snapped the flip cover open. “Laughlin,” she snarled, “and this had better be good.”

Mike didn’t even bother trying to pick up the other side of the conversation from her mind. He didn’t want to breach her privacy, but he also knew that his head couldn’t stand much more telepathy.

“Wait one,” Laughlin said. He put her hand over the speaker and looked up, her expression a mix of consternation and anxiety. “We have a problem. Travis has left Fort Meade. Lancelot was unable to learn his whereabouts. We have to assume he’s going to link up with the aliens, now that he knows Omicron has failed. I can’t risk sending Omicron out after Travis; he knows them too well.”

Jake glanced at Mike, saw his exhaustion and spoke. “We’ll go. Mind Mistress, Wind Shear, Techno, you’re with me. We’ll pick up Lancelot at Meade and try to pick up Travis’s trail. Techno, grab that scanner you used before to pick up the alien ship. We’ll use that again, if we can’t find any better alternatives.”

“We’ll come with you,” Carpenter said. “We need to let Marka rest, as well as the others. If we take the Protector, we can be at Meade inside of an hour.”

“Let’s do it,” Laughlin said. “We’ll continue this later.”

“Yes, General,” Mike said, managing to keep his voice even through force of will. As soon as the team had piled out of the room to the conference room, Mike slowly lowered himself to the couch beside Terry and let out a very exhausted sigh.

“Hard day at work?” she asked in a light tone.

He smiled faintly at the jest. “And then some,” he replied. “Melissa, see if you can get Ray up to your rooms without doing any more damage to his ribs, and then both of you konk out. You’re on leave until you heal up.”

Melissa nodded and got up, scowling at Ray. “Yeah, yeah, I’m comin’,” he growled as he levered himself to his feet, drawing in a hissing breath through his teeth as his ribs grated. “See y’all in the morning.”

After they had left, Marka turned and stared at Terry’s belly, swollen as her pregnancy raced along. Terry blushed self-consciously until Mike put his arm around her. He was too tired to path her, but he knew that she needed some reassurance.

“You are beautiful,” Marka said haltingly, as she worked her tongue around the unfamiliar words.

“Thank you,” Terry said, relaxing slightly. “I do not feel beautiful.”

“Did you not choose to be have child?” Marka asked.

“Yes, I did choose to have a child,” Terry said, “but now I am afraid. We take much longer to have the child than your people. I do not know what it will do to the child.”

“You fear for the child,” Marka said. She looked down at her feet. “I envy you.”

“Why?” Terry asked. “You are very beautiful. You could have any man you want. Why do you envy me?”

“Because you chose your man,” she said, “and you chose to have his child. I had neither choice. I was given to Callaghan as a gift, and I will be taken by a man to bear children when he wants.”

“That’s slavery,” Terry said, sitting up on the couch.

Marka nodded. “Yes, it is.”

Mike groaned. "We'll discuss this more in the morning. Right now, I'm beat and you two both need rest. Marka, we have a spare room where you can stay."

"I, I will have my own room?" she asked, her voice spiking in a squeak of joy that made her sound very young.

Terry smiled. "Yes, you will." Her voice was soothing, as was her smile. Mike squeezed her shoulders, reassuring her. It looked like she would get some early practice mothering with this one.

Travis looked around at the trees towering over the dirt road. The call he'd received had been from Callaghan all right, but he couldn't believe he had to meet him in this out of the way place. Still, it was probably safer. They would have to have a bulletin out for his arrest. He snarled at the injustice. Him, a loyal soldier of his country, was now a hunted fugitive, all because he hadn't kowtowed to those metahuman freaks.

The road finally ran out, running into a large clearing in the woods. Travis got out, looking around for anyone or anything. He couldn't hear anything; not any animal noises at all, just the wind in the trees. Travis had spent enough time in the field to know that this meant something was wrong. He pulled his service automatic from its holster, praying that the little 9mm would be enough against whatever had scared everything away.

"Put that away, Travis," a voice called from the woods to his right.

Travis spun in that direction, bringing the weapon up to his eye line. "Callaghan?" he said, hoping he recognized the voice.

"More," the voice said. The speaker moved forward into the light. He was tall and muscular, his bare chest a rippling mass of muscles. He wore only the barest loincloth for clothing. His legs were equally ripped. Callaghan's hair was deep black again. The face was close to the same, but more handsome. "They made me more."

"Who?" Travis said. "Who could do something like that?" He had trouble keeping the gun steady. The sight of the senator rebuilt into an Adonis stirred his own hopes and fantasies. He knew that his own body was showing signs of age, despite his best efforts. If they could do this to Callaghan, could they do it to him?

"They can do much more," Callaghan said, as if reading his mind, "just let them. Come with me, and emerge a new man."

Lancelot met them at the landing pad normally used for helicopters. The sight of the Protector One descending brought out numerous onlookers, gaping as if they had never seen a VTOL aircraft before.

“General,” Lancelot said stiffly as Laughlin deplaned, “we searched the entire compound. General Travis has fled.”

“Do you have any idea where?” Laughlin asked.

“No, ma’am,” Lancelot replied. “We searched his office, but we couldn’t find any notes or other clues. The phone system reported receiving one call from a cellular phone, but the number was unlisted. However, the timing of the call appears such that whomever called told Travis to flee.”

“Did he take a fleet vehicle?” Laughlin asked.

Lancelot nodded. “Yes, he did. However, you will remember that Gen. Travis supervised the project that designed and placed the trackers on those vehicles. The tracker for the vehicle he took was disabled before he left the garage.”

“Damn,” Laughlin swore. “How are we supposed to find him with no leads at all?”

“Leave that to me, Seniorita,” Techno said, pointing to his goggles. “Just take me to Senor Travis’s office.”

Laughlin nodded. “Follow me.”

Travis’s office was in an outlying building, rather than the main administration building. “He worked on a variety of covert projects,” Laughlin explained, “so he insisted on not being in the main admin area. It also kept him out of sight, so evidently he could do what he pleased.” She pointed to a door, marked with yellow crime-scene tape. “That one.”

Techno nodded. “Please, amigos, stay out of the building while I do this. It is a mucho delicate procedure.” He ducked under the crime-scene tape, and stepped into the office.

Once inside, he brought his left gauntlet up to his eye-line and began tapping keys. The bio-energy scanner he had incorporated into these goggles was a major refinement of the prototype Mike and Rich had put together before the war. Where that unit could only scan for certain, metahuman signatures, these could pick up anyone’s signature and follow it. Unfortunately, he could tell that Lancelot and his investigative team had already been in the office. Their energy signatures were confusing his readings.

He turned slowly, quartering the office, filtering through the faint bio-energy traces for the dominant trace, the one that had been left on the room the most, if not the most recent. Slowly, piece by piece, the signature came together.

Techno smiled when the system signaled that it had a complete signature. “Okay, hermano,” he said quietly, “time to show miss generalissimo who’s da man.”

Techno slipped out under the crime scene tape, smiling broadly under his goggles. “Got him,” he said. “Bearing north-north-west, and he’s not close.”

Laughlin nodded. “Get moving. Lancelot, go with them. If you find him, drag him back here.”

Ray fought back a groan of pain as Melissa set him, none to gently, on the edge of the bed. She held out her hands to him. “Let’s do it,” she said in a tired, small voice.

“Hang on,” Ray said. “You’ve got to heal that jaw up first. If I take your energy now, it’ll just make it worse.”

“So?” Melissa squeaked. “It’s not like I’m any good in a fight anyway. I just get beat up. At least you can hold your own.”

“Quit it with the self-pity,” Ray growled. “You need to charge up first, and then you can charge me.”

“Charging?” Melissa whined. “Is that all it is to you?” She turned away from him and flung herself onto the bed, hot tears spilling from her eyes.

“What did I say?” Ray asked her heaving back. “It’s who we are. We need to accept it.”

“Says who?” Melissa sobbed. “It’s what makes us freaks.” Ray groaned at her intransigence and lay softly onto the bed, looking up at the ceiling while he waited for her to cry herself out.

Mike groaned softly as his aching head hit the pillow. Terry looked over at him. “You’ve never acted like that before.”

“I’ve never used my powers constantly for so long,” he said. “That’s why I didn’t levitate you up the stairs.”

“No problem,” she smiled. “I needed the exercise. I need to take care of myself every once in a while. But I didn’t mean that.”

“Marka,” he said. He didn’t have to read her thoughts on that one. He couldn’t dodge it any longer. “I thought I was strong enough to resist anything. I mean, I couldn’t possibly love, or desire, anyone more than I do you, but she’s just designed to be physically attractive on a level that evolution, even mutant evolution, just can’t match.”

“Compared to the others, you were behaving very maturely,” Terry said, “but I know you too well. I pity her, though.”

“Maybe you need to enlighten some of the others,” Mike said. “All I could get from most of them was either jealousy or mindless desire.”

“You know what I mean,” Terry replied softly. “She can’t help that she looks like that. She was made to look that way. She has never had any kind of real education. She can barely count. She seems intelligent; she’s pieced together an awful lot without any kind of teaching, but she just seems, pitiful, somehow.”

“Everyone has just been interested in her for her looks,” Mike said. “Everyone has also discounted her as just a sex object. We do neither, at least by her standards, so she’s almost like a puppy. She wants so much to be loved, not just lusted after.”

“You sound like you pity her too,” Terry said.

“I do,” Mike replied. “Remember, I’ve been inside her mind. I’ve seen things you don’t want to know about. The way she was treated by her people, it was slavery of the worst kind. The worst part is that most of the women don’t even mind. They’re almost pre-sentient. Marka’s not. She may be some kind of genetic throwback. We got lucky. If it had been another female assigned to Callaghan, she probably wouldn’t have even conceived of running away.”

Terry smiled. “We have a habit of being lucky. But we make our own luck. If you had gone right after Marka’s body, I don’t think she would be as open as she is. She would think we were just like the others, and wouldn’t trust us as much as she does. Since she believes that we are different, she’s helping us.” Terry yawned. “I don’t know about you, but I need to get to sleep.”

“I definitely do,” Mike said. “I’ll see you when I wake up.”

“Damn,” Techno snarled. “I’ve lost the signal.” He glanced down at his gauntlets, and then up at his visor. “Tracker’s still working. He moved inside something heavily shielded.”

“Spaceship,” Crimson Knight growled. Normally, Jake would have taken his helmet off while they were in the Protector One. However, with Lancelot along, he wasn’t going to risk it. Lancelot may have backed out on Omicron in the fight with Mindstar and the others, but he wasn’t going to bet his identity on that.

“Probably, jefe,” Techno replied. “I can’t track those through the plane. We’ll need to dismount.”

“Right,” Crimson Knight muttered. He activated his helmet radio, which was keyed to the control radio frequency. “Hover. We’ll dismount and finish the sweep. Stay in the area as long as you can. When we’re done, come in and pick us up.”

“Roger,” the pilot replied. “Good hunting.”

The jet slowed perceptibly. Crimson Knight swung the left forward door open; Techno opened the opposite one. Mind Mistress moved up, standing in front of Crimson Knight.

Lancelot looked out the door. “Hey, we’re still airborne,” he said. “How do we deploy? I don’t see any zip lines.”

“Don’t need ‘em, amigo,” Techno answered him. “Stand over here.” He pointed to a spot in front of the door. Lancelot complied, although his expression told them that he wasn’t pleased with being ordered around. “Now, stick out your arms.”

“Why?” Lancelot asked. “I can’t fly.”

“Not on your own,” Techno replied. “Just do it.” Lancelot scowled, but he complied. Techno reached around him, locking his arms around Lancelot’s shoulders in a full Nelson hold.

“Deploy,” Crimson Knight ordered as he locked Mind Mistress likewise. Techno stepped out of the door, firing his boot jets as soon as he was free of the aircraft. Crimson Knight’s rockets also sounded distantly against the roar of the Protector’s engines. A strong gust of wind whipped his hair as Wind Shear used her powers to bring herself down.

As soon as Lancelot’s feet touched the ground, Techno released him. The Asian meta spun away. “Damn it,” he snarled, “you could have warned me.” As the Protector flew away, the darkness enfolded them. Stars sparkled overhead.

“Warned you about what, cabrone?” Techno replied. “Easiest way to get down if you can’t land the bird.”

“Techno,” Crimson Knight barked, “what’s the bearing?”

Techno looked down at his gauntlet then around at their surroundings. They were on a trail through a forest. Activating the IR in his goggles with a switch, he could see a faint heat trail radiating up from the bare ground. “Tire tracks,” Techno said. “Heading that way.”

Crimson Knight nodded. “Too narrow for a four-wheel-drive. Good money makes that Travis. Techno, you and I have point. Mind Mistress, Wind Shear, back us up. Lancelot, watch our back trail. We’re in Indian country, people. Look alive.”

Travis blinked as his eyes registered light. The last thing he remembered was sucking a warm fluid out of what looked like a plastic breast. He felt *different* somehow.

“Ah, General Travis,” Callaghan said, standing at his bedside, “I was expecting you to awaken.”

“Did,” Travis stopped, surprised at the deep resonance of his own voice, “did it work?”

“See for yourself,” Callaghan said, motioning past the foot of the bed Travis was lying on. Sitting up, Travis could see a full-length mirror. The image reflected in that mirror was more than all of his daydreams combined: a full head of dark hair, well muscled, without an ounce of spare fat. This was the body he had always dreamed of having.

“This is amazing,” Travis said. He looked at the flesh himself; just to be sure the mirror wasn’t projecting an illusion. It looked real, felt real and firm and warm.

“Yes, it is,” Callaghan replied. He looked past Travis. Travis followed his eyes to see another man, also impossibly handsome and dressed in a simple harness and codpiece of what looked like leather. “This is Barkaz, our host,” Callaghan said.

“An honor,” Travis said, reaching out to take Barkaz’s hand. Barkaz’s handshake was strong.

“Senator Callaghan has spoken often of your skill, General Travis,” Barkaz replied. “Now, I am afraid I have need of your skills.”

“In exchange for this?” Travis said, spreading his arms. “How can I refuse?”

“I knew you would be agreeable,” Barkaz replied with a smile. “This harness should be appropriately sized.” Travis slipped it on. The material was not leather, more like plastic, but it did have the softness and suppleness of the best leather.

Barkaz led them out of the room into a corridor. The walls were gray, but not silvery. Travis didn’t think they were metal at all; they didn’t have the look he knew from some joint-command work he had done onboard Navy ships. These almost looked organic, or natural, somehow.

Barkaz stopped inside a small room off of the corridor. Three men were sitting around a table, muttering into the air and watching an image dance above the table. Travis instantly understood what he was seeing: a holographic image of the trail he had driven down. Five figures were moving down that trail on foot. He could see five forms sitting back in the perimeter of the image, waiting for the group.

“We are not a violent people, General,” Barkaz said, “but occasionally we need to defend ourselves from inhospitable native peoples. We use advanced robots for that purpose. However, their tactical artificial intelligence can leave something to be desired, I believe is the correct phrase?” Travis nodded. “We control them from here. However, even our tactical skills are not particularly advanced. I would like you to augment them with your own skills.”

“My pleasure,” Travis said. He looked more closely at the image. Even though it was obviously night, he could still make out details. Three men, two women were in the group, although one of the men was in some kind of suit of armor.

“Crimson Knight,” he said. “Those are Guardians.”

“Yes,” Barkaz replied. “Your disappearance appears to have brought them out.”

Travis looked more closely at the team. “Those are the b-team. Mindstar, Strongarm, none of the big guns are there. This shouldn’t be difficult.” He glanced at the men around the table. “Can they understand me?”

Barkaz nodded. “We have all learned your language. If there is any confusion, I will translate.”

“There had better not be,” Travis said. “Even the Guardians b-team is still a tough crew.”

Crimson Knight scanned around their path. With his visor set to display infrared, he saw the forest as a welter of cool blues and blacks, as the trees gave off the heat stored up during the day. His comrades (he did not think of Lancelot as a teammate) appeared as warmer yellows, oranges and reds. He expected to see more animal life, but he decided that he would rather do without squirrels or raccoons pestering them as they went along.

Something stopped his scan. He stopped moving, holding up his hand for the team to stop. Looking closer at what had caught his attention, he saw the blue of a tree above a patch of utter blackness.

“Mind Mistress,” he whispered, “link now.”

What is it? she asked in his mind.

Something off the trail, he thought. *It’s close enough to hear if we talk. Link the entire team.*

He felt Mind Mistress reach out to the others. Their presence touched his mind as they were linked together. It felt like they were all holding hands, only much more intimate. *Techno, scan left. Look for a dark spot in front of a tree.*

Got it, Techno thought. *Is it something artificial?*

Maybe, Crimson Knight thought. *Remember in the ship? They hit us with robots.*

Robots? Lancelot didn’t know enough to say that only in his mind.

Yeah, they use robots Crimson Knight thought. Suddenly, beams of azure light flashed out of the darkened woods. Mind Mistress shrieked as one hit her high on the shoulder. She stiffened as her muscles clenched and blue sparks played over her body, and then she collapsed in a heap.

“Wind Shear,” Crimson Knight yelled, “get some altitude.” A vortex of wind sprang up as Wind Shear leapt into the air. Another azure beam of light shot out, searching for Crimson Knight. He ducked as the beam missed high, and he fired his laser at the beam’s origin point. A bright flare of sparks confirmed his aim and their foes were robotic.

“Don’t hold back,” he called, “they’re robots.” He backpedaled to Mind Mistress’s side, firing at random into the woods. While he doubted that the robots were actually afraid, he could hope. He could hear Techno firing into the woods on the opposite side of the trail. He didn’t hear any sounds to indicate that Techno was actually hitting his target, but he expected that.

Lancelot dropped to the ground beside Mind Mistress. Crimson Knight spared a glance and saw that the Asian soldier wasn’t hurt; he was only going to ground. “I’m a close up fighter in a ranged fight,” he said. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

A beam finally found Crimson Knight. His view screen flared white as the beam discharged its energy into the armor. Jake only felt a light jolt, like a bad shock, but the suit almost seized up as the systems reacted to the energy. “No argument here,” he shot back. “I read only one more hostile on the left flank. Get in there and see if you can take it out. I’ll carry the WIA.”

“Yes, sir,” Lancelot said, his voice betraying pleasure at finally having an easy order to execute. He ran into the woods, beams sparking behind him. A crackle of electricity from behind him told Jake that Techno had finally hit a target.

“Techno,” Crimson Knight called, “prepare to break left. Cover our backs.”

“Si, jefe,” Techno replied. “I’ve got your back.”

Mind Mistress groaned weakly as Crimson Knight slung her over his left shoulder. “Sorry,” he muttered, “but I don’t have much choice.” He started moving into the woods. He had just passed the tree line when a humanoid figure appeared in front of him. The metallic sheen told him it was a robot, but he couldn’t get his right arm on target in time. The robot’s weapon fired a brilliant azure beam. This time, at this range, the beam hit high on Crimson Knight’s chest plate. Lightning bolts danced over the armor as the limbs seized up and every display flared and went out. Jake was barely able to roll the armor to the right, so that he didn’t fall backwards onto Lindsey with the armor’s full weight.

“Hiiyah,” Lancelot shouted as he hit the robot from behind with a brutal overhand chop. The blow severed the robot’s head from its torso, leaving the torso to crumple and sending the head bouncing off of Crimson Knight’s scorched armor.

“Techno,” Lancelot called. “I took out the other bot, but CK’s down.”

“Damn,” Techno snarled. An energy bolt scorched the dirt near his right foot as he backpedaled, firing as he moved. “Wind Shear,” he called as he keyed his radio, “take ‘em out. I read two more.”

Clouds scudded across the sky and peals of thunder began to sound. “What the hell?” Lancelot muttered.

“Stay low,” Techno said, “you don’t want to be standing up when she cuts loose.”

“Aw, heck,” Lancelot groaned, “you mean she’s...”

He never finished the sentence. A jagged bolt of lightning struck out of the sky. The target robot was silhouetted for an instant against the actinic glare of the bolt, and then it vanished in a flare of parts as it burst under the raw power of the direct hit. A peal of thunder slammed into Techno and Lancelot, shoving them into the dirt and deafening them.

The robot’s partner tried to take revenge by firing into the air, but Wind Shear easily dodged the bolts. The blasts only gave away its position. Before the thunder from the first bolt died out, Wind Shear unleashed another one on the second robot. Again, the lightning bolt found its metallic target with ease. When the thunder echoed away the second time, the woods were silent.

Wind Shear floated down to the edge of the woods near Techno and Lancelot. Lancelot was shaking his head, trying to get the ringing out of his ears, while Techno knelt by Crimson Knight. “Hey, jefe,” Techno said, “what’s your sit?”

“Controls are fried,” Jake growled from inside the suit, his voice barely audible without the armor’s speaker. “System won’t reboot. I’m useless. Leave me and continue the mission.”

“No way,” Techno said. He looked at Wind Shear and Lancelot. Lancelot wasn’t a Guardian, and Wind Shear would do whatever he said. Mind Mistress was still out, and the bump on the head she took when Crimson Knight went down wasn’t helping matters. That left him in command. “We’re not going anywhere except home.” He stood up and keyed his radio. “Protector One, this is Techno. Come in for pickup at my coordinates. We have two wounded and are aborting the mission.” He never imagined that words could taste so sour as the last three he had just spoken.

At first, Mike thought it was a fly buzzing in his ear. He didn't want to wake up, but the fly wouldn't go away. Finally, Mike decided to wake up enough to deal with the fly, only to realize that it wasn't a fly. The phone beside the bed had been buzzing.

He picked it up, trying to move slowly, both to humor his still aching head and to avoid disturbing Terry. "Longstreet," he said quietly.

"There's been a problem," Carpenter said from the other end of the line. "I was just alerted by the flight crew on the Protector One. They're aborting the mission and heading back. Crimson Knight and Mind Mistress are WIA, and Techno called the abort."

"Damn," Mike swore. He knew Techno had done the right thing with the two WIA, but he didn't want to know what had taken down Crimson Knight so easily. "Does Laughlin know?"

"Not yet," Carpenter replied, "but she will by morning."

"Great," Mike snarled. "I'll debrief them when they get in. From the sound of it, I'll have to do some fancy footwork to keep Laughlin happy."

"Probably," Carpenter said, "but it also sounds like Techno made the right call. Make sure he knows that."

"Right," Mike said. "Get some sleep." He hung up the phone.

"What's wrong?" Terry asked. Her voice was soft, but she didn't sound sleepy.

"The team ran into some trouble, so Techno aborted the mission. Laughlin is going to raise hell. I've got to figure out what happened and smooth things over. Besides, we've got wounded." He touched the intercom control. "Doctor Stone to the landing pad. Wounded incoming." He pulled the covers back and sat up on the edge of the bed, waiting for his head to start working. He hadn't gotten enough sleep, and it showed, but his headache had moderated. Unfortunately, it felt like his thoughts were moving through molasses.

Terry's sharp intake of breath cut through the fog in his brain. "What's wrong?" he asked, spinning around on the edge of the bed. His equilibrium protested the swift move, but his heart ignored it.

Terry was sitting up in bed with a pinched expression on her face. Her eyes were screwed shut, and her breathing was ragged. "It's the baby," she panted. "He's kicking, but I've never heard anybody describe it as being this intense. It feels like he's trying to get out right now."

“Easy, easy,” Mike said, trying to project calming thoughts. The effort hurt more than he tried to show, but he knew Terry getting wound up was not going to calm the baby down. “Remember, he may be as strong as you are. From the outside, it may feel like he’s really working you over, but he’s just doing normal stuff. He’s just really strong.”

“I was, kind of hoping,” she panted, “that he’d have your strength, not mine. He’s just going, to, make this, hard.”

The door to the room swung open. Mike looked up, hoping to see Doctor Stone. Instead, Marka stood inside the door. “Forgive me,” she said in her halting, lilting English, “but I heard pain. I can help. I know how to sooth women with child.”

Mike nodded. He had seen, in her mind, her ministering to expectant mothers. Given the lack of education that the Beytraskans gave their women, it was about the only thing the girls were allowed to do. “Please help her,” Mike said as he stood up.

Marka walked up to Terry and pulled Terry’s long nightshirt up just enough to get at her swollen belly. Humming some tune to herself, Marka began to massage Terry’s sides. Marka’s fingers were strong; they reached muscles easily, draining away tension while also strengthening them.

In a few moments, Terry’s breathing had eased and she relaxed. “That feels so good,” Terry said. “Thank you, Marka.”

“You are welcome,” Marka replied. “The baby is very strong. It will not be easy.”

Mike could feel Terry’s relaxation in his mind. He caught another thought that also felt relaxed. He thought it was Marka, but the feel was wrong for her. Still, there was no one else in the room.

“The others will be returning soon. Marka, please stay with Terry until I return.” Marka smiled broadly and nodded vigorously. Her please at finding something useful to do was evident enough to be painful.

Mike handed Juan a cup of coffee, making sure that Juan had a hold of it before he released it. Even though he hadn’t been injured, the wide-eyed stare on Juan’s face reminded Mike of a shellshock victim from a war. He smiled inwardly. Command could do that to you. Juan was still in his armor; he had just removed his helmet. While Juan desperately needed a shower, Mike wasn’t worried about his hygiene right now. He was worried about his mental state.

“For the record,” Mike said, “you did the right thing. You had two team members down in hostile territory against an unknown number of enemies with capture a singularly unappealing prospect. Despite Crimson Knight’s orders, you needed to assume command of the mission and you made a command decision, and you made a good one.”

“Do you think General Laughlin will see it that way?” Juan asked with at least the hint of a smile.

Mike shook his head, but he was also smiling. “No, I doubt it, but that’s the least of our worries. Thanks to you, Mind Mistress is going to be fine, with nothing more than a headache to show for the night, and Jake is going to be fine. We’ll need to come up with a way to insulate his armor from those energy bolts, but that’s a task for tomorrow. For tonight, you did the best you could.”