

**THE FOUNDATION**  
**PART NINE**  
**INVASION: PART THREE**  
**BY**  
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“You’re lying,” Terry snarled as the Beytraskan loomed over her. “You don’t want what’s best for me. You only want my and my son to serve your perverted desires.” She was finding it hard to stay mad. He was so close now; she could smell his male scent. It was almost intoxicating.

“Perverted? Hardly, my dear,” he said, even as he reached out and lightly caressed her skin. “Oh, by the repressed standards of your world, I suppose we would appear perverse, but we’re not so bad.” He began walking around the bed Terry was laying on. His right hand stayed in contact with her as he moved, his fingers tracing along her body. “We believe in pleasure, not pain. I know you will find your stay here eminently pleasurable. We can even remove the pain from the birth process. We have a great deal of experience in easing that along. Did you know that our females give birth in much the same way you do? Only, as you have noticed, they are pregnant for far less time. Nine months, really, is much too long.”

The touches were making Terry’s mind fuzzy. “That’s, that’s the way we are,” she said simply.

“Ah,” the Beytraskan replied, “but that’s the difference. We have decided to no longer be content with how we were, but we have changed ourselves into what we want to be. We can change you, as well.” The door whooshed open again, admitting a young girl carrying a bowel.

“Right on time,” he said. The girl smiled and brought the bowel to Terry. Terry could see that it was full of a white liquid, almost like a thin cream. It had an unusual smell, but somehow it was familiar. “Now, drink,” the Beytraskan ordered.

“What is it?” Terry asked.

“Something that will give you strength for the birth,” he said. “Now, drink.”

Resigned, Terry took the bowel and drank. The substance was thicker than it looked, with a strange, almost salty taste. The taste was also familiar, but she couldn’t quite place it. Still, when she had finished, she felt stronger, as if she had more of her

endurance. She also felt kind of light-headed. She was warmer, too. Being naked didn't bother her as much. The man's touches felt good.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, with a giggle. "I am."

"Good," he said. "Now, rest. When the time comes, we'll be here."

Sarah was burning, swimming in a sea of fire. Heat washed through her, scorching her mind but not her flesh. She was so used to cold, she'd always had that ball of ice at her core. Now, she was ablaze, and the ice wasn't there.

"Sarah," a soft, deep voice called to her. She looked up from the sea of flames. "Sarah," the voice called again. Not really insistent, but strong. It was calling her back, calling her back.

Sarah opened her eyes, gasping for breath. She wasn't swimming in a lake of fire. She was hanging, her arms stretched out from her shoulders and her legs manacled to a metal wall. Looking down her body, she gasped. She was naked, her skin red, sweat pouring down her body. Her hair, stringy and sweat-soaked, hung down, obscuring her view of the room, other than a patch of light-color floor.

Gathering her focus, she was able to force her burning muscles to lift her head. Blinking sweat from her eyes, she was able to focus on Tony. He was also hanging in much the same manner as she was, and he was also naked. His body was a mass of thick muscles. She knew he was strong, but she would not have guessed how muscular he really was. With his massive shoulders, his head jutted out from the wall. She could see that his eyes were clear, but his expression was calm, almost too calm.

"Where, are we?" she panted.

"Inside an spaceship," he said calmly. "At least, that is the logical supposition. The individuals which attacked us in the base were obviously the aliens that the Guardians had been fighting for some time, and we were taken as hostages and experimental subjects."

"What kind of experiments?" Sarah asked, although she could guess, given her state.

"Attempts to block our powers," Tony replied. "They have given me an injection that neutralizes adrenaline, preventing me from accessing my strength or becoming emotionally charged. In your case, it appears that you have been given a drug raising your body temperature to a point where you can not consciously access your powers."

“An intelligent deduction,” a new voice said. A door opened outside of Sarah’s limited view. A man strode into her view. She first got a look at toned calves and strong thighs, and then a muscular, but trim torso. His only clothing was a pseudo-leather harness and codpiece. She felt a different type of fire begin to build inside her. She couldn’t help it; he was impossibly handsome, and the fire already burning seemed to sense his presence and attack her in another way.

“As you have surmised, we have used various substances to neutralize your powers. While you are valuable, we have more pressing matters to attend to than your conversion just yet. However, you will not be neglected.” He walked over to Sarah and took her chin in his hand, tipping it up and allowing him to look at her face. “You, in particular, will prove interesting, young one.”

“Go to hell,” Sarah snarled.

He smiled. “Defiance. Good. While subservient females are only natural, it takes some of the thrill out of the conquest. Wouldn’t you say so?”

“I would not know,” Tony replied, trying to avoid looking at Sarah with the man standing there.

“Perhaps we should try a different course with you,” the man said as he walked over to Tony. “Rather than inhibiting your animal nature and allowing your intellect free reign, we should enhance your animalism until your intellect no longer exists.”

“Leave him alone,” Sarah shouted.

“You have no part in this debate, girl,” the man snarled at her. “Be thankful I don’t give you a dose of the Rebirth right now and watch you go mad trying to sate your urges. Instead, since you seem so fond of each other, perhaps we should try another strategy.” He turned and strode out.

“What did he mean?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t know,” Tony said. “But I don’t like it.”

“Wake up, Colonel.” Carpenter heard the voice calling him to wakefulness. Even when he was awake, he kept his eyes closed for a second, taking in his surroundings. His arms were stretched out from his shoulders, and his legs were manacled, pinning him to a metal wall. He wasn’t stretched out so far the he couldn’t breathe, but it was close. He was also stripped. The sound had come from in front of him; he couldn’t hear any other breathing close buy. Given that he could see plenty of light on the insides of his eyelids, he opened his eyes slowly, blinking as if he had just awakened.

His eyes settled on the young man sitting facing him. He wore a leather harness and codpiece. His features were familiar, but he couldn't recognize who it was. The man was muscular and trim, like an athlete. He wore a pistol of some sort on the hip of the harness.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," the man said. The voice was definitely familiar, even if the body was not quite.

"Travis?" Carpenter asked in disbelief. General Travis was at least twenty years older than this man.

"Correct. I'm sure you're wondering about the age difference. It seems that our mutual hosts, the Beytraskans, know quite a bit about biology that we humans have only barely guessed. They restored me to my youth as a gift."

"You mean as payment for betraying your whole species," Carpenter snarled.

"Betraying? Hardly," Travis replied. "I like to think of it as acting as an ambassador. The Beytraskans aren't interested in conquest. It's too much of a waste. They'd much rather we allied with them on our own. Of course, they're also not afraid to rig the bets in their favor."

"By controlling the minds of those who can deliver the rest to them," Carpenter replied.

"Not always," Travis said. "They do not control my mind. I came to them of my own free will. That makes me more effective. I agree with their goals, but I keep my own counsel as to the methods. That allows me to give them an outside view of their own schemes. In the end, we both win."

"And the human race loses."

"No, the moralizing puritans and the radical feminists lose. Really, Colonel, take a look around. Wouldn't the world be a more peaceful place if every woman was as beautiful as Marka, or your Terry, and they were all eager to please? With less competition, men would be free to concentrate on important matters. Beytraska went from pre-space flight to interstellar space travel in a short amount of time after the Rebirth."

"And what of the women? Yeah, they look pretty, but they're all but mindless. That's not love in my book."

"A small price to pay," Travis snorted. "Besides, in some cases, I'd say it would be an improvement. Let us men take care of things and keep those preening females out of our way."

"If you think you're going to sell me, don't bother," Carpenter said. "I ain't buyin'."

“We’re not interested in selling you anything, Colonel,” another voice said, “as we are in being sure you understand our position.” Another young man strode up. This one was more handsome than the other, and slightly less muscular.

“Senator Callaghan, I presume,” Carpenter snarled.

“Quite perceptive, as well as presumptive,” Callaghan said. “You are correct. The Beytraskans may have bribed me with Marka at first, but this new body really proved that they had knowledge and technology that we could use, as well as an excellent sense of life itself.”

“Spare me,” Carpenter replied. “What do you want from me?”

“Your cooperation,” Callaghan said. “While General Travis is a storehouse of strategic knowledge, your skill at managing metahuman operations is unparalleled, except perhaps by the late, unlamented Black King. The biggest ace in the hole for our opponents is your team of heroes. Once we know how they operate, we can defeat them in detail.”

“Never,” Carpenter spat. “I’ll never betray the Guardians. They’ll put you down like a rabid dog.”

“I doubt it,” Callaghan replied smugly. “In fact, they will likely be the ones put down. Still, I know better than to underestimate them. That is why I need access to your strategic mind.”

“Give it a rest.”

Travis smiled. “Actually, for the moment, we will let you rest. When we return, we will finish this conversation.” They left and the light cut out as soon as the door shut, leaving Carpenter in the dark with his thoughts.

Mindstar stood just inside the door of the Protector One as it touched down inside the Guardian’s base. He was exerting every ounce of self-control to keep from bouncing from foot to foot; he was barely able to stop his hands from trembling. He’d never been out of contact with Terry for this long since they had become lovers, and he missed the presence of her loving strength in the back of his mind badly.

“Okay, listen up,” he called as the engines went silent. “We have to assume that the base has been invaded by a hostile force, and that we may still have hostiles in the building. Strongarm, Firemane, you’re with me. We’re going to the command center to get the security systems back online. With any luck, that will give us an idea of what happened, or is still happening. Techno, Wind Shear, I want you two to head for Medical and secure it. If anyone is still here, they may be hiding there. Crimson, you take the rest and do a room-to-room sweep. Mind Mistress can alert the rest of us if you find anything. Ready?”

“No,” Strongarm groaned, still weak from his injuries at ParaMax One, “but what the hell. They came into our house; let’s make anyone left sorry they stayed.”

“I have point,” Mindstar declared with grim finality. He triggered the landing stairs, which extended out from the fuselage just under the door to the ground. As soon as they locked down, a small light on the control panel went green. Mindstar grabbed the door release and cranked it open. He raised his force field as he lifted the door, just in case.

No shots came at them. In fact, the hanger was silent, save for the hissing of steam from the heated surfaces of the engines. Mindstar moved quickly down the ladder. He couldn’t feel any minds nearby; that didn’t mean there weren’t obstacles, but at least there were no intelligent enemies.

As the Guardians spread out behind him, Mindstar slowed his pace, giving himself a sight line on each door before he passed it. No enemies emerged, just an eerie silence that pervaded the base. Mindstar could never remember it being this quiet.

“Elevator’s up,” he stated as he walked up to the platform. “Stand clear.” Techno and Wind Shear broke off to secure the medical lab; the rest of the team waited for the elevator to descend. Mindstar, Strongarm and Crimson Knight stood close, braced for anything. The rest stood one to two steps back, giving themselves enough time to dodge any unpleasant surprises.

The elevator completed its descent without incident. The team got on, standing by the edge of the table, all faced outward. Mindstar tripped the button, starting the elevator back on its way. All eyes were on the outer edge of the ground floor, waiting for the slightest sign of an ambush, for any hint of treachery.

None came. With a quick hand motion, Crimson Knight led his group off of the elevator deck and out the door. Strongarm strode over to the monitors for the mansion’s security systems, Firemane at his shoulder and Mindstar watching the door.

“Aw hell,” Strongarm swore.

“What’s up?” Mindstar asked.

“Take a look.” Mindstar glanced over Strongarm’s shoulder. The security monitors all showed “Security System Deactivated.” An icy ball formed in Mindstar’s stomach.

“The override?” he asked.

Strongarm nodded. “Got to be.” He swore vigorously.

“What override?” Firemane asked.

“Later,” Mindstar said. He mentally reached out to Techno.

*Anything?*

*Yeah, Techno thought back, most definitely. Looks like it was Alamo time down here.*

*Roger, Mindstar thought. Stay there. We’ll rendezvous down there.* He next sought out Mind Mistress.

*Anything?*

*Nothing, she thought. We’ve cleared the first floor and we’re working on the second floor, but so far nothing.*

*Go down to Medical when you’re done, he thought.*

“Reset the system, clear the override, and let’s go. I want to take a look at Medical myself.”

Medical was, quite simply, a mess, Mindstar decided. Several of the beds had been overturned, others had scorch marks on them. A pool of water near the door was all that was left of some of Sarah’s projectiles. Crash carts and other implements were strewn around almost at random.

“Last stand all right,” Strongarm muttered under his breath. “Wonder if it was all of them?”

“Probably,” Crimson Knight said. “None of the other rooms show any sign of struggle. It looks like they were all down here when it went down.”

“Why?” Aria asked. “I mean, the kids should have been in class, Carpenter would have been in the office, and Marka would have been with,” her voice trailed off.

“With Terry,” Mindstar growled, his voice finally betraying his pain. “Terry must have gone into labor. They would have all rallied around to help her, and then they were attacked.”

“Uh, boss,” Techno, said, “no sign that she gave birth here. I mean, I’m no doc, but you’d see a lot of blood, at least on dressings. Nothing like that around here.”

“How’d they get in so easy?” Mind Mistress asked.

“Callaghan,” Mindstar growled. “He and his *committee* were concerned that, given our profile, that someone could attack the base when we weren’t here and *regular* forces would need to be able to get inside. So, we had to code a radio override into the security

systems. When he went bad, he gave the Beytraskans the code. We didn't think he remembered."

"I guess he did," Wraith said.

"What's the next step?" Firemane said. "I mean, we're not going to just leave Terry to them."

"First, we take care of our wounded and rest, as much as we can," Mindstar said coldly. "This isn't the final act. They may have the ball, but we're not out of the game. We just need one good break." Nobody had the heart to tell him that he'd mixed his metaphors.

The hissing alerted Carpenter that something was happening. The cell was still dark, but he could hear the faint hissing of gas being injected into the cell. He couldn't smell anything, but he doubted that the Beytraskans would be sloppy enough to give a gas an odor anyway. He clamped his mouth shut and held his breath.

Normally, he would be able to hold his breath for several minutes. This time, he felt a tingling on his skin almost immediately after hearing the hissing. As he felt his temperature rise, the truth hit him. The drug was skin-absorbed. In his current situation, there was nothing to stop a drug like that.

His body heat soared. Before, he had been slightly cool; now, he was boiling alive. He could feel the heat move into his muscles. They burned as if he'd just put in a strenuous workout, even simply hanging there. He could feel a tingling from his scalp. His skin kept tingling. He tried to keep his attention focused on his mind, to watch for any changes there, but he couldn't sense any. He tried to keep any image of Alyina in his mind as the drug worked on him, tried to focus on her purity rather than just her physical beauty.

As his body heat began to drop and the tingling subsided, the shackles opened, spilling him onto the floor. He managed to catch himself, sparing himself any injury more serious than some complaining knees and palms. The lights sprang on overhead. Panting with the stresses of the drug transformation, Carpenter remained on the floor.

The door opened. "Well, Colonel," Callaghan said, "how do you like the new you?"

Carpenter looked at his body. Rather than the trim, but aging form he knew so well, he now looked as he had in his prime. His body hair was dark, not graying; he knew that his head hair would also be dark. His muscles were toned and thicker; the gut he was beginning to acquire was gone.

"Very much," he said with a smile. "Youth really is wasted on the young."

"Indeed," Travis said. "Now, however, we must attend to business. Are you with us?"

Carpenter nodded, his smile still in place. “Yes. Now I see what you can do. I will help you.”

“Excellent,” Callaghan said. “For now, we need you to keep an eye on things. General Travis and I need to rally our support in person. You will need to help Barkaz keep Pain and Rampage in line.”

“What’s the plan?” Carpenter asked.

“We finalize our positions,” Travis said. “With Callaghan’s political support and my Omicron team and the military command, we can authorize the Beytraskans to begin their final program. The spray used on you was a test. We had to know if it performed as advertised. Now that we know it works, we can have the Beytraskans prepare it for mass deployment. Once that begins, nothing can stop us.” Carpenter joined in their raucous laughter.

Mike sat on the foot of his bed, staring at the floor between his legs. Their bed, he thought. His and Terry’s. While not quite their wedding bed, it was still theirs. And now she was gone.

He’d known they’d had something special when, not long after they had met, he found he could stay in contact with her mind over longer and longer distances. Not a full contact, not at first, but he could feel the touch of her mind in his. Her strength, her vivacity, was always with him. When she was in danger, or under attack, he would know it and could try to buoy her up with his courage and love. Now, for whatever reason, he could only feel her at all if he strained, and even that was stranger and stranger.

Focusing his mind and will, he reached along the thread of thought connecting him with Terry. It felt like following a fishing line that had been strung between them; thin, almost imperceptible, but it was there. She was so far away that he couldn’t pull them into full contact. He could only get a surface read on her. She was strangely contented; it felt almost like a drug high, with a sense of physical pleasure overlying it.

He couldn’t bear the thought. He knew enough of the Beytraskans to have an idea of their M.O. They were using physical pleasure, probably in conjunction with their nanomachines, to break Terry’s will. When they’d used the nanomachines on her before, they hadn’t counted on her pregnancy. Terry was outwardly unaffected, but the infestation had changed the fetus into some hybrid of human and Beytraskan. Now that they knew they were dealing with a pregnant woman, they could adjust their techniques.

She’d been taken away from him twice before. The first was during the War. She’d stayed behind while he got the President out of the country, so that he could organize the fight against the Shadow Empire’s takeover of the country. He’d defied Carpenter’s orders in order to go back and rescue her. The Dominatrix had used her tricks to weaken

Terry's will to live almost to the breaking point, but he'd gotten her back just in time, and he was able to use his telepathy to bring her back. The second time was when Arcanus and the Chosen One captured her deliberately in order to turn her against him. They used her jealousy and hurt at his not proposing to her against him. Only by actually proposing did he break their spell. He'd never regretted that decision a single day since. Not even today.

A light knock on the door broke him out of his reverie. "Come in," he said quietly. He just couldn't get his command voice going right now. He was feeling the loss of Terry's strength too acutely.

Kat stuck her head in, with Rich looking over her shoulder. "Hey," she said, "we thought we'd check on you, see how you were doing."

"Fine," he replied. "You healed the damage well enough."

"Not what she asked," Rich said. "We just wanted you to know that we miss Terry too."

"And we want to get her back just as bad," Kat finished.

Mike smiled. "Thanks." They were the originals, or at least the survivors. He, Terry, Kat and Rich had made the term Guardians a household word. They had sacrificed their freedom and their hope of a normal life in order to make a difference. All had stared at death and had saved each other's life. Rich had denied his attraction to Kat almost to the point of comedy. Kat had tried, clumsily, to seduce Mike to make up for it, but everyone knew that her heart belonged to Rich, just as Terry's belonged to Mike.

They weren't the real first ones, though. That honor went to Golden Guardian and Sifu, two normal humans with skills and a desire to help others that had fired them. They had given their lives against metahuman opposition on the front lawn of the White House. Mike missed them terribly, perhaps even more because he didn't see them die. Instead, he had been inside, trying to stop the Black King from firing nuclear weapons at the troops landing outside Norfolk to overthrow his government. The Shadow Empire metahumans, desperate to avoid capture, had resorted to lethal attacks. Golden Guardian and Sifu had fallen, only to have the other Guardians redouble their attacks and finish off the Shadow Empire.

"You can't bring them back," Kat said.

Mike smirked up at her. "I thought I was the mind reader around here."

"I don't need to be," she said. "I've seen that same face in the mirror when I think about them: if they'd be proud of me, if they'd approve of what I've done, if they'd want me to work harder. I finally decided that I couldn't worry about what they'd think and only worry about what I think of myself."

“I hate to interrupt the deep moment,” Rich said, “but we do need to get our minds back on business. Such as, how are we going to get Terry back?”

“I don’t know,” Mike said. “I can trace where she is, vaguely, but I think she’s in a space ship. The Protectors can do a lot, but flying in outer space is outside of their capabilities, and we don’t have the resources to modify them for exo-atmospheric flight, much less rocket takeoff. Other than getting the rest of us captured and taken to their ship as well, I’m not sure I have any good ideas, or even desperate ones.”

“Then allow me to assist,” a new but familiar voice said. Lady Alyina strode into the room. Dressed in a flowing gown of almost blinding white, she looked every inch a spirit of magic given human form. “Theresa is not the only one in mortal danger. Brian is also in grave peril, and I could not forgive myself if I allowed either of them to fall into darkness. I have a way to get your and the others to the enemy ship, but the risk will be great.”

“When isn’t it?” Mike said, standing up. His depression was gone, replaced by grim resolve. Now he had a chance. As long as he had that, he wouldn’t give up. It wasn’t something that he’d allow himself. “Let’s get the team together in the briefing room. We have a mission to prepare.”

Gunny sat on his bed, staring at the wall. Ever since Lancelot had betrayed the, the members of Omicron had been kept in “house arrest,” confined to their quarters. They weren’t guarded, but they were under observation constantly. With General Travis’s disappearance, they weren’t considered high priority, but they were considered security risks. While the guards tried to keep them from knowing where the others were, Triton had used some skills that weren’t in his official file to keep them in rough touch with one another. Gunny had ordered them to sit tight.

Right now, he didn’t know what to do. His whole adult life had been obedience; first as a Marine grunt, and then as a sergeant. The Corps was his family and his reason for living. He lived to serve, and he’d done it well. He’d followed Travis because he was ordered to and it hadn’t crossed his mind that he was being played. Sometimes the orders didn’t make much sense, but he’d gotten used to that. You were supposed to shut up and soldier. They didn’t pay sergeants, even gunnery sergeants, to think.

Since they’d been arrested, he’d had plenty of time to think. They’d been betrayed, he was sure of that. However, despite the fact that Lancelot had sold the team out, he’d been forced to confront the idea that Travis was using them as pawns in a bigger game. He was familiar with the feeling of being a pawn, but not one to be used against the chain of command. The sight of General Laughlin’s face on that monitor ordering him to stand down had shaken something loose inside of Gunny. He was still trying to figure out what had been shaken loose and where it belonged.

A sharp knocking on his door brought his head up. The MPs didn't need his permission to come in, and he hadn't had many other official visitors. The door opened, admitting a young man in a uniform with MP armbands. The twin bars on each collar proclaimed him a Captain, which went with his young appearance. Some young hot shot here to try and question me, he thought. Another in a long list.

"Gunnery Sergeant Hightower," the man said. It wasn't a question. Gunny turned to look at him, but he didn't stand up. Prisoners didn't salute. Something about his voice was familiar, though.

"Look at me," he ordered. Hightower looked up at him. The face was strong, with a well-defined jaw and high cheekbones. The features were ruggedly handsome, with dark eyes that showed intelligence and determination. They looked familiar, but it took him a moment to recognize them. At least, he knew who looked like that.

"General Travis?" he asked, incredulous.

"Very good, Sergeant," the man said. "Don't worry. I've set the recorders to overlay a recording of a previous interrogation, so they didn't pick that up. Yes, it's me. I've come back for you and Omicron."

"Back from where, sir," Gunny asked. "Where did you go?"

"To meet with some allies," Travis replied. "They have technology we can only guess at, including their ability to rebuild bodies. Laughlin and her bunch don't see the advantage, but I know you can."

Gunny sat quietly for a moment. Travis wouldn't have risked exposing himself unless he needed something. There was only one way to find out what that was. "What do you want me to do, sir?"

"Gather Omicron," Travis said. "If you're as resourceful as your records indicated, you've managed to keep in touch with each other, whatever the MPs wanted. Meet me down in the motor pool at 1600 hours."

"And Lancelot?" Gunny asked.

"Forget him," Travis ordered. "When we win, he'll get his, but he's not worth worrying about until that time. Don't worry, we'll have plenty of time for revenge after our allies come through. We just have to be ready to do our part." Gunny nodded. He'd be ready, all right.

Terry had felt the pressure building for some time. She'd kept expecting pain, but there wasn't any, just a sense of building pressure. She wondered if the stuff she'd been

drinking had anything to do with that. Maybe it was the other stuff they were spreading on her skin. It made her feel warm and good.

It was getting harder to think. It took a lot of effort for Terry to remember what this was supposed to feel like. It felt so good; it was hard not to just go with the flow. Still, she knew it was supposed to hurt a lot. They must have kept it from hurting.

The pressure got more intense. She could feel the baby pushing out from inside her; it felt like someone trying to get in, only much more intense. It felt so good, she wanted to cry out, but she couldn't make a sound. She pushed with her inside muscles. That made her feel much better. The pressure was building higher now, pleasure coming in waves. Her mouth opened in a silent scream as she felt the baby leave her body and she collapsed, shaking.

“Look at him,” Barkaz said as the female midwife held up the baby. He'd seen enough babies to know that the red, shriveled look would pass soon enough. This one was big, strong, and male. That was what he had wanted. “Just like a Beytraskan.”

“Indeed,” Irkan said, looking at the child. “As I recall, they do tend to look like us.”

“Yes,” Barkaz said, “but not this much. No, the exposure to our gas changed this one into a near-perfect Beytraskan, with all of the powers of both of his parents. Once the scientists have examined his DNA, we will have the secret to their powers, and there will be no stopping us.” Barkaz laughed hysterically, and Irkan smiled a languid smile.

Carpenter smiled at their laughter, and then looked down at Terry. Her face was slack, exhausted with pleasure. He reached over and tousled her long hair before he turned and left the room.

“See,” Barkaz said, motioning to the door, “he adapts well to our ways. He even desires this one as a clan-wife. Not quite so primitive at all, once you cut away the wrong ideas.”

“Indeed,” Irkan said, looking at the new mother. “What will you do with her? Surely you have no need of another nurse.”

“No, no,” Barkaz said. “In fact, I was thinking of letting the runaway, Marka, nurse it. We would have to give her the drugs at first, but that will also bind her to us. It will impress on her the hopelessness of escape when she is forced to suckle the get of those who would aid her. Besides,” Barkaz gazed longingly at Terry's body, “I might enjoy her myself when the prescribed time is past. She would be a change from our females. They are beautiful, but sometimes too much the same.”

“As you wish,” Irkan said. “It is no matter of mine. When you are ready to commence the colonization in earnest, notify me. I will be on the bridge for my tour.”

“As you wish,” Barkaz said, bowing low.

Carpenter found Pain and Rampage in the meeting room. He was supposed to be there several minutes ago, but he wanted to watch the birth and, besides, he knew Rampage was going to be late in order to try and get the upper hand. By being late himself, he had reasserted his station. They were all dressed in harnesses and codpieces in the Beytraskan fashion. Callaghan knew that the other two had been enjoying themselves with the Beytraskan females. He had abstained, ostensibly to prepare for the Guardians' impending assault.

"What's the plan, boss-man?" Pain said in an attempt at frivolity. Carpenter could see Pain's eyes measuring him, watching for the slightest mistake or misstep. Pain hated being second fiddle, despite his long experience at it. Callaghan didn't plan on giving him any more opportunity than the Black King had.

"We wait, for now," Carpenter said.

"I'm sick of waiting," Rampage snarled. "Let's go down there and kick their asses. We almost had them at the prison, but you schmucks pulled us out."

"You were about to get your heads handed to you," Carpenter said. "We pulled you out just before the Guardians put half of you in the hospital. No, we wait. If they want to fight, they will have to do it on ground of our choosing and control. They won't be able to cut loose inside a space ship; they'll have to hold back. We know how strong this ship is, and where the exterior walls are. We can cut loose. That's our edge."

"I still don't like giving up the initiative," Pain said.

"Tactically, maybe," Carpenter said. "Strategically, no way. We have plans in motion now that will take the Guardians out of the equation in other ways if they sit back and wait. I do not believe they will. They will attack, and I believe they will attack here. I will not tell you to ignore the pleasures of service, but try to keep your people in some sort of combat readiness. When they come, they will attack quickly and efficiently. See that you are in position to do the same."

"What about the kids?" Pain said. "I know Barkaz wants to keep Powerchick around, but what about the others?"

"They are neutralized," Carpenter said. "Release them from their bonds and toss that doctor in with them. If Barkaz decides they are excess bodies, we can just gas the whole lot and be done with it."

Tony was almost asleep when the manacles holding his wrists and legs opened. He barely managed to catch his landing on his hands and knees. Sarah, still writhing in her personal sweatbox, was unable to do as much, and she crumpled to the floor, groaning.

“Sarah,” he said as he moved towards her, and then stopped. If she were radiating so much heat, would his body heat hurt her?

“Tony,” she moaned. “Are, are they letting us go?”

“I doubt it,” Tony said, looking around. “I imagine that they decided we are no threat to them, so it was easier for them to unshackle us. It is probably a show of contempt.”

“I wish,” she panted, “that, they would, show us, some nice, cold, wet contempt.”

Tony smiled. “Perhaps they will.”

“Tony?”

“Yes?”

“Hold me, I don’t want to be alone.” That answers that question, Tony thought. He moved over to her gingerly, stretching cramped muscles. He could feel the heat washing off of her as he cradled her in his thick arms.

The door slid open. Tony set Sarah down gently and faced the door. Dr. Stone came stumbling through, obviously pushed from outside. He crumpled to the floor in the corner as a tray of food was set down. The guard sneered at them, leering at Sarah briefly before leaving.

“Dr. Stone?” Tony asked.

“Ohh,” Stone groaned. “These people have no hospitality for medical professionals, none at all.”

“Nor for anyone else, I believe,” Tony said.

Stone rubbed his head as he turned around. “What have they done to you?” he said, looking over their lack of clothes, forgetting for the moment that he was in similar shape.

“They have injected me with an adrenaline neutralizer, or something similar,” Tony said. “They have given Sarah a drug which raises her core temperature dangerously. It renders her unable to use her powers, but I am concerned for other side effects.”

“I see,” Stone said. “It appears that we are stuck, as they say.”

“Perhaps,” Tony said. He walked over to the tray of food. It didn’t appear appetizing or hot, but it was something. Perhaps they had drugged it, but it was a chance they would have to take. He and Sarah needed the energy, certainly, and he had no idea what Stone had been through since his capture. “However, we are free of the restraints. That must

count for something.” His eyes kept roaming over the walls and ceiling as he munched on a piece of fruit.

Mindstar took his seat at the head of the table in the Guardian’s briefing room. He was acutely aware of the empty seat at his left hand, where Terry sat, but he couldn’t let that bother him. He was also aware of Alyina and Alex Hawke, aka the Chosen One, standing behind him. He couldn’t let that bother him either. He had a team to brief.

“As you are all well aware, earlier today, operatives working for the Beytraskan forces here on Earth entered this facility by stealth and kidnapped six of our personnel, including two trainees and one of their own seeking asylum with us.” And my wife, he didn’t add; he didn’t need to. “I have every reason to believe that the riot at ParaMax One that we were putting down at that time was, at least in part, a diversion to keep us out of this facility for a long enough period of time for them to complete their mission. I also have every reason to believe that they have taken them to a space ship or other vessel orbiting this planet.” That brought out some gasps and widened eyes.

“Until now, I had not conceived of a method of infiltrating the hostile spacecraft that stood a reasonable chance of success. Given the capabilities that they have displayed in atmosphere, it is reasonable to assume that the craft would be shielded against any conventional form of detection. That negates any conventional attempt to locate the craft, much less dock to it. The fact that the ship may mount ordinance can not be discounted. However, Lady Alyina presented me with a viable option.”

Lady Alyina stepped forward on Mike’s right side, and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I and my apprentice, Alex Hawke, have the ability to cast a teleportation spell of sufficient power to bring all of you to any point on the globe, or over it. It will not be easy, but it is doable, provided that we can locate the ship.”

“That is where I come in,” Mindstar said. “As some of you may now, I have been around Theresa, and in telepathic contact with her, long enough that I can sense her location, albeit in general terms, from extremely long distances. By using that link, Lady Alyina and Alex will transport us to the enemy ship.”

“How will we get back?” Aria asked.

“That will be up to us,” Mindstar said. “It will take all of Alyina and Alex’s strength to get us there. We’re responsible for finding a way home. I won’t lie to you; this will be one of the hardest missions we’ve been on. This may be rougher than the mission into Washington, D.C. at the end of the War. That one cost us two of our people. Also, we’ll be inside a space ship. We have no way of knowing where the outer hull is, once inside, or any way of gauging the structural strength of that hull. Therefore, no long-range energy attacks. Mind Mistress and I can use our mental attacks, but nothing that could potentially rupture the hull. If the hull goes, we all die. This one will be strictly volunteers-only. Anyone who wants in, raise your hand.”

Every hand on the table went up as one. Aria smiled shakily, but she held hers high. Mindstar smiled. "I thought so, but I needed to give you the out. Wind Shear, are you comfortable with what you will have to do?"

Jinn nodded. "Yes. In order to train my mind and body, I have been studying Tai Chi Chuan for many years. I rarely use those skills in combat, as my powers are more effective, but they will be useful here."

Mindstar nodded. "Excellent. Aria, what about you?"

"I'll do what I can," she said shakily. "I don't know how effective I'll be, but I can't leave Terry, Tony and Sarah to those monsters."

Mindstar nodded. "Good enough. Okay, here's how we'll take this one down. Once we're teleported aboard, Mind Mistress or I will grab the first Beytraskan we see and pull the layout of the ship from his mind. Once we have that, we'll split up. Strongarm, Firemane and myself will head for the prisoner holding cells, and then for the command deck. Crimson Knight, you'll take the rest and head for Engineering. Your mission is to take control of the ship's engines and power core and hold them. Depending on how the mission is proceeding, I'll give you different orders telepathically. You're our ace in the hole. If we fail and you succeed, we can still win the war. If you fail, we lose the war. It's that simple."

"Understood," Crimson Knight said. "One option is Armageddon?"

Mindstar nodded. "They won't be able to discount the threat. That one is a drop-dead-last resort, though. I fully intend to bring all of us, and the prisoners, home in one piece."

"Uh, do we want to know?" Aria asked. "I mean, we are going along on this mission."

"When you need to know," Mindstar said, "you'll know. When can we go?"

"It will take a few minutes for us to prepare for the sending," Alyina said. "It would be easiest in a large, open space with nothing extraneous."

"The training room," Mindstar said. "Step forward, you two." As Alyina and Alex stepped onto the platform, Mindstar triggered the elevator, dropping them down into the lower level of the base.

Barkaz strode into the bridge, scowling briefly at Carpenter, sprawled in the captain's chair. "What have you to report?" he said.

“No detectable activity aimed at us,” he stated. He keyed a command sequence. The air shimmered with a holographic image, showing two thin metal towers rising up over concrete pads, with grasslands and water visible beyond.

“No activity at Kennedy,” he stated. Another command showed more towers, this time with desert visible. “The same at Vandenberg,” another, this time with jungle, “and French Guiana,” another, with snow and ice, “and Cosmograd. There are no other launch facilities capable of boosting a craft into an orbit with us. That is, if they even knew what orbit we were in. They are not attempting a conventional space launch for interception.”

“So, they are ignoring us,” Barkaz said smugly. “Callaghan will have it easy.”

“I doubt it,” Carpenter replied. “Remember, Lady Alyina and the Chosen One are still unaccounted for. They represent a dangerous factor. They have the potential to transport the Guardians to this ship undetectably.”

“As you have said before,” Barkaz growled. “I will not revisit the topic.”

Carpenter nodded. “How go your experiments with the child?”

Barkaz smiled. “Our scientists have extracted the genetic sequence that I believe controls the child’s latent abilities. They are currently preparing the serum. I will be unable to control operations for at least some time after taking the serum. I am depending on you to keep the plan running.”

Carpenter nodded. “You can count on me. No matter what the Guardians do, they will lose the war this day.”

Gunny furtively glanced each way as he slipped into the motor pool. He wore an MP armband stolen from one of his captors, along with that man’s uniform blouse. He was lucky that they’d chosen a brawny MP to keep watch on him. Of course, that man’s brawn was useless against Gunny’s powers, but it did make getting out of the barracks easier.

He could see movement deeper inside the bay, so he crept forward, keeping as close to the row of parked vehicles as he could. If it wasn’t them, or if it was a trap, he could dive between or under a vehicle before anyone could get to him and either get out or fight his way clear. Considering as he’d already laid out two MPs, he was getting into a fighting mood.

Blockhouse saw him first. “Glad you could make it, boss,” the big, black soldier said. Amazon and Triton were also there.

“Where’s Travis?” Gunny asked.

“Right here,” Travis said as he emerged from between two parked vehicles. “I just waited until all of you were here to put in my appearance.”

“We’re here,” Gunny said. “Now, what do you need?”

“As you’ve noticed,” Travis said, “I am not the same man physically that you knew before. That is because of the Beytraskans, an alien race with phenomenal biological technologies, as well as space travel. They came to Earth looking for an alliance, but first they needed to find out if they could survive in our atmosphere and vice versa. The people they picked up for their tests were the ones you’ve heard about that were kidnapped. When the Beytraskans explained who they were and what they could do, the people accepted them, but the Guardians have kept the people locked up. However, the Beytraskans tried again, and they contacted Senator Callaghan. Callaghan is marshalling diplomatic resources as we speak to get into a position to reveal the Beytraskans’ presence to the country and to offer an alliance with them. We need to be available to deal with any resistance.”

“What’s in it for us?” Triton asked.

“The Beytraskans have been studying metahuman abilities,” Travis replied. “They can enhance each of your powers to levels that you’ve only dreamed of. All you have to do is say yes.”

Gunny looked at each of the others. Each looked back at him levelly. They trusted him to make this decision. They trusted that he would make the right one. He just had to be sure what the right decision was.

Alyina stood with her back to the door and motioned Alex around the group. “Now, stand in a group, as close together as possible.”

“Crimson, Strongarm, Firemane, Wraith, Techno,” Mindstar called, “wheel formation outside. Mind Mistress, Aria, Wind Shear, on the inside.” The Guardians moved calmly and surely, forming a circular formation with Crimson Knight, Strongarm, Mindstar, Firemane, Wraith and Techno facing outward and Mind Mistress, Aria and Wind Shear inside the circle, also facing outward. The Guardians backed together until they were as compact as they could get without suffocating anyone.

Alex had taken up his position on the opposite side of the group from Alyina. At her nod, both of them raised their hands and began chanting softly. Mindstar could not make out the words, but he could feel something start to happen. It felt like a static charge was building on his skin.

“Whoa,” Firemane breathed. Her hair was starting to lift off of her shoulders, but she wasn’t looking at that. Her eyes were fixed on Alyina. “That’s some major power.”

Bluish light formed around the two mages' hands, as if they were glowing with St. Elmo's fire. Each spread their hands out as wide as they could, as if they were embracing the group between them. Their chanting grew louder as a bluish light began to glow on the floor around the group.

"Michael," Alyina said, "reach out with your mind now."

Mindstar nodded. Closing his eyes and focusing his concentration inward, he felt the thin tether of thought that bound him to Terry. Grasping hold with his mental grip, he pulled himself along the line at the speed of thought. He felt himself becoming thinner as he raced away from his body, but he didn't slow his flight. He felt as thin as paper, as thin as air, when he finally felt Terry's thoughts throb through his being. He tasted just enough of her mind to know that he didn't want to go into full contact right now; it would be way too distracting. Instead, he concentrated on her location. He reached out a tendril of thought to Alyina, who was standing a few feet away and many miles away at the same time.

"I have it," she said, her voice throbbing with power. He could also hear the effort it took to contain that much power. "Return, or this will be twice as disconcerting." Mindstar flew back along the thread to his body.

He could feel the static electricity feeling much more distinctly when he returned. Opening his eyes, he could see Alyina's silver hair floating with the energy. She appeared to be washed in blue, as if he was looking through a blue pane of glass. Instead, he realized, he was looking through a blue field of energy. The energy formed a shell around the group, steadily growing more opaque. He could see Alyina's lips moving with the words of the spell, but he could barely hear her for the crackling energy.

Her mouth opened suddenly and, instead of sound, a bolt of lightning shot out and exploded against the energy field. The field flared a brilliant white for an instant. Mindstar felt himself moving impossibly fast. He was again stretched as thin as paper, before he snapped back to himself with a physical impact. He stumbled, lost his footing, and landed on his knees.

**THAT'S ALL FOR NOW. LOOK FOR INVASION: PART FOUR COMING SOON!**