

August 5, 1997

Jen was sitting on a cot letting Mirry check her over for wounds.

The flickering yellow lights of the old Dynamax facility they were using as a headquarters freaked her the hell out. The cot she was sitting on was one of several that might have been used to strap people down for the experiments, before late last year. Now it was where they were resting in-between saving the world.

Danny was standing over at a series of big monitors that he was using to coordinate with folks all over the world. Some German woman was being especially loud at the moment, and Jen didn't know how Danny kept his cool dealing with them all. Apparently the Chinese had done something big, fired off some kind of Omega-based weapon, and taken out one of the Hak ships... and killed off all their own Omegas in the process. They'd gotten reports that the Haks had taken this to be an invitation and were swarming over mainland China now.

She hated to admit it, but better there than here.

They'd barely held Chicago. New York had been even harder. Most of the world was holding its breath, because most of the *Haks* were still up there. Fighting among themselves. Jen's eyes slid over news reports Danny was watching, Omegas fighting aliens in Boston, Los Angeles, Galveston... many of them former Colony.

She thought she'd seen a familiar mop of brown hair in Boston, but they'd cut away too quickly. So Danny's plan to let the Colony disband and the Colonists go home seemed to be

working – they’d formed a kind of impromptu powered militia, defending their homes. ‘Colony trained’ meant something, after all.

“You’re mostly in need of food.” Mirry finished up her examination. “There’s stuff in the commissary. I don’t know what. Jimmy went out the last time.”

“What was this place before?” Jen looked around it.

“Apparently *he* had it designed for when they were going to show up.” Mirry was *very* pregnant – she had to put her hand on her belly to move around sometimes. “I don’t mind telling you, I hope we’re done with all this soon. I do *not* want to give birth in this place.”

“It’d be nice if the planet wasn’t conquered too.”

“Trust me, if you were 39 weeks along, you’d be agreeing with me.” She blew some stray hairs out of her face. “Go, eat. Take a break. Our new allies are telling Danny all sorts of interesting things about what’s going on up there.”

“They freak me the fuck out.” Jen stood up, flexed. “They keep *staring* at me.”

“I’m sure they’re as scared of you as you are of them.”

Mirry smiled, but it was a tired smile, and Jen ached for her. She and Danny had gotten it into their heads to have a baby – from what Mirry had let slip, it was more her idea than his – and now she was in the middle of this whole mess waiting for it to come. Jen put her hand on Mirry’s shoulder, squeezed it gently, and then hopped down off of the raised area with the beds and walked down into the bunker.

The past several years, she’d spent a lot of time in bunkers. Tomas Peter and Jimmy were upstairs, along with Nihilist,

who spent almost all of her time when they weren't wrecking some Hak's day sleeping. Jen was starting to recognize the signs of depression and PTSD – it wasn't hard when everyone she saw every day had reason to be, after all – and Nihilist had it the worst of any of them. Next to Danny, at an incredibly intricate table with a big computer screen built into it, Door was studying the Hak ships. Thanks to their 'friend' they'd had solid layouts of several of the bigger ships, it had been helpful for Door to use them to teleport them on and off. He still didn't like teleporting into space, though.

He looked up, waved. She waved back. Door was incredibly useful for this war, but God, she hated knowing that this slight, frail looking little kid was probably the number one target for Haks. He looked like a stiff breeze would kill him. Danny kept him far away from combat, but he couldn't afford *not* to use him.

The commissary was just that. It was mostly deserted – even with the new guests, their little band of freedom fighters was a lot smaller than the place was originally designed for. Jen walked over to a gadget Jimmy had whipped up, a robot with a chef's hat and apron.

"Greetings, designate Jennifer-Dufresne. I am Zoltan. How may I serve you?"

"Food." She didn't feel like playing the 'is it live or isn't it' game with one of Jimmy's tinkertoys. Soon enough the robot had placed several slices of what looked like store-bought pizza on a plate for her. She took it and walked a few yards away to eat, snagging a can of soda on the way over.

She was half-way done with her sixth slice when she saw

Eric walk in.

If she looked rough (and she knew she did, with her clothes burned in six places, bloodstains on her legs, and a still healing slash on her forehead that had gone through and into bone originally) Eric looked... she didn't even know what he looked like. He was wearing ripped up jeans and no shirt, and he had bruises *everywhere*. He looked like he'd been worked over. She'd seen that before, more times than she liked to remember, when she'd been liberating people from Dynamax. He looked up and saw her, nodded in exhaustion, and slumped over towards the robot cook like he was going to pass out before he got there.

"Woah!" She got up and bolted over, caught him as he staggered. "What the fuck?"

"Sorry." He was blinking. "Just... tired."

"I thought you healed fast." She looked him over again.

"I do heal fast. Twenty minutes ago I was covered in third degree burns too." She'd moved him over to the table she was sitting at.

"Is this from..."

"Twenty of them jumped me when I tried to go after the big ship." He barked a laugh. "They took out Mount Everest. I figured..." He coughed. "But they showed me the error of my ways."

"I'm amazed you're alive."

"So were they." He smiled, but it was a weak thing. "A few of them look worse than I do."

Jen frowned at that. Eric was a good guy in a lot of ways, but he was essentially a passive one – even after he'd triggered,

he'd spent most of his time hiding in his room playing guitar. It was hard to blame him – on his first mission he'd lived through the death of Jarod, one of the Colony's old hands, and Eric had been *in his head* when he died. Essentially, Eric knew what it felt like to die. It had freaked him out pretty hard. Now he was being thrown face first into an alien invasion as their biggest gun.

"I saw what you guys did in Chicago." He said. "Impressive, taking down a ship like that."

"I got to be on TV." Jen smirked. "But I know *you* know all about that."

"Not my fault the camera loves me." He huffed. "Goddamn I'm so hungry but I can't get up."

"I'll go get you something. Soda okay to drink?"

"Sure, I'm not feeling picky." She walked over to the robot, got more pizza, then headed back to the table with it and two sodas. He was half-passed out when she got back, but perked up when he smelled food. "Oh. Good. Yes. I was here for that. Thank you."

"How are you holding up?"

"Could ask you the same thing." He swallowed the pizza in four bites. She almost laughed, it was like eating with herself.

"They have a name for you, you know."

"Do they?"

"Dykaranal Ka Havris." He smiled, drank half the can of soda in one go.

"And that means..."

"The Fire Hair Woman of Earth." He leaned back on the bench, chewing on another slice of pizza. She waited for him to

finish it, sensing more was coming. “For them, this is all terribly exciting. It’s how Danny has managed to play them against each other. Most of that fleet is up there watching it. What you did in Chicago... you won their hearts.”

“So they’re not just aliens, they’re fucking weirdos.”

“They’re aliens, but they’ve very *human* aliens.” He gasped, clutched his side for a second. She half rose from her seat, but he waved her off. “My rib just healed.”

“Oh, I *hate* that feeling.”

“I *know*.” They both laughed. “When the bone knits together and pulls itself back into place...”

“That cracking sensation as it sets itself, ugh.” Jen shook her head. “Only thing worse is when I have to regrow teeth.”

“I just popped in a new molar, so I hear you.” They sat there for a while. Jen kept looking him over. He looked so tired.

“Okay, you I can ask this.”

“Anything, you know that.”

“Are we really going to *win*?” She pointed above her head. “There’s a whole shitload of them in orbit...”

“Not so many as you think. A few hundred thousand, less than a thousand of the really *tough* ones. Oh, it’s enough to pave the planet if they wanted to do that. But they don’t.”

“What do they want?”

“Us.” He rolled his shoulders side to side. “This. The world and all of us on it. We look like them. We breathe, we eat, we have sex. This is a religious experience for them. Centuries from now, some Harrakin will tell his grandkids about the Fire Hair Woman of Earth, how she brought down a vessel and slew its crew.”

“They’re *happy* about that?”

“They knew what they were in for.” He shrugged. “We all have to go sometime. If you’re going to die, getting to do it on the Havris – Homeworld – at the hands of a legendary warrior woman isn’t so bad.”

“I’m *seventeen*.”

“To answer your question, yeah, we’re going to win.” He closed his eyes. “I have no doubt in my mind. Danny is coming up with a plan and when he reveals it we’ll all think it’s insane, he’ll talk us around, we’ll execute it and we’ll win and it’ll all be over...” His voice trailed off and she looked at him, at the miserable, exhausted look on his face. “Well, almost all of it.”

“What?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Don’t fucking lie to me, I’m the Fire Hair Woman of Earth.” He laughed at that, and put his head down on the table.

“I can’t see things like Danny can. But I just *know* that when this is all said and done... my life’s going to be over. I just *know* it. I can *feel* it, Jen. It’s like scraping my thumbnail down the E string of a guitar, except it’s *me*, I’m the guitar. We’re going to win but I’m not coming back from it. Maybe I won’t be dead... but it won’t be the same.”

“Of course it won’t be the same. None of us are going to...”

“Go to Boston.”

“We talked about...”

“Fucking *go to Boston*.” He sat up. “Go to Boston and find him and... just *tell* him.”

“He’s with someone else by now. Maybe...” She swallowed. “Maybe Lucy, they were always really close, and I’m

sorry I brought her up but you started this.”

“He’s not with Lucy.” Eric was rubbing his eyes with his hands. “And even if he is, we’re getting down to the wire here.”

She opened her mouth to say something and stopped. A naked woman with long black hair and a muscular build not terribly dissimilar to her own, an inch or so taller than Jen, had walked into the room. Since Jen was around six three and change, the newcomer was forced to duck a little to enter the room. Her almost coppery skin was covered in weird black and gold symbols, like metal tattoos, and she swiveled her head until she saw Eric and Jen sitting together.

Eric saw the look on Jen’s face and turned his head, saw her coming in.

“Her name’s Sharra. She’s...”

“I know what she is.”

“I was going to say *my cousin*.” Eric stood up as Sharra approached. Jen felt again that weird sense of dislocation she always got around Haks. She was glad more people hadn’t seen them like this, she didn’t like the idea of being mistaken for one of them. “Sharra Tattris’Ka.”

“Ky’Rian Kyrion’Ka.” The woman nodded to him. Then she turned to Jen. “Hello. I am learning your language. One of them. The one Ky’Rian speaks.”

“Hey.” Jen found herself nodding. “You guys don’t believe in clothes, huh?”

“We know they exist. But when one is as well formed as you, they seem pointless.” Sharra turned to her cousin. “You did not tell me the Fire Hair Woman was so lovely.”

“I’m... sorry?”

“I forgive you.” Sharra sat down at the table. “You were eating together.”

“Yeah, we do that sometimes.” Jen sat down too. Eric stood for another couple of seconds, noticed everyone else was sitting, and did so himself. “Don’t you guys ever eat together?”

“Often.” She looked at the pizza. “What is it made of?”

“Pizza? It’s dough, covered in cheese, tomatoes, pepperoni in this case...” Jen cut off at the look of confusion on Sharra’s face.

“I’m sorry, I am still learning, I don’t know all these words yet.” The metal squiggles on her shifted and moved. “Ky’Rian has been teaching me since I arrived.”

“She’s one of the ones who came looking for Kyrion before the fleet arrived.”

“I honor my father but he is misguided. Uncle Kyrion is correct, we must not bring war to the Havris. It will not please our shared ancestors.” She had a strange look on her face.

“How often do you share food with each other?”

“When we’re hungry?” Jen said. “It’s not a big deal.”

“But it’s so... intimate.” Sharra’s eyebrows went up – perfect eyebrows, Jen had to admit. It was hard to miss how hot Sharra was when she was basically naked. “Have you two mated yet?”

Eric looked at Jen. She looked back at him. And then they both broke down laughing. It wasn’t really *that* funny, but it was funny enough. And they were both exhausted. Eventually they stopped, leaning against each other for support. Sharra’s face was thoughtful.

“It’s this that confuses me.”

“It’s not that confusing.” Eric straightened up. “Jen and I have known each other for a while. We’re close, but it’s not that *kind* of close.”

“This is one of your love things, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Jen had no idea why she was talking. “I love someone else, and Eric and I... well, we love each other, but not that way.” She messed up his hair affectionately. “He’s a dork, but he’s my dork.”

“Back home, love is... we consider it dangerous. There is familial love, which is more like duty. That is permissible. And the bonds of loyalty, of course. You are similar to this. But to not mate because you don’t feel passion... that I can’t say I understand.” Sharra looked thoughtful still. “Do you have others that you *do* love that way?”

Eric opened his mouth but the alarm went off before he could speak. Jen was on her feet immediately.

“What is this noise?”

“Code red.” Indeed, it was specifically the code red sound from some old TV show Jimmy liked to watch. Jen couldn’t remember which one. Eric was on his feet next to her in short order.

“Sharra, please get the other exiles together and wait. I’ll call you if I need you.”

“As you say.” Jen watched her walk away, a little distracted by the view.

“How come you’re giving her orders... and she’s taking them?”

“She accepts Kyrion as her leader. He accepts me. It’s a whole thing.” The two of them were hustling now, moving

faster than human up the stairs. Jen knew he was faster than she was, but he wasn't in tip top shape, so it ended up being her holding back a little so he could keep up. It was hard to gauge what Eric's limits were – Jen had fought and killed Haks, even four or five of the ones like Sharra with the glowing green eyes and the fancy armor blob suits, but Eric was different. She was starting to worry that he was pushing himself harder than he could sustain, though.

When they got upstairs Danny was standing at the monitors, like he always seemed to be lately, his hair lank against his scalp. She knew he was expending enormous amounts of energy, his powers almost constantly in use. The problem with telepathy is, no one can see you using it so no one thinks about the effort involved. The first time Jen had used *hers* she'd spent a day in the dark with a rag over her eyes, and people like Danny and Mirry used theirs constantly.

“What's going on?”

“We have two problems.” Danny pointed to one monitor, showing a Hak ship the size of a couple of aircraft carriers over Paris. “This happened two days ago. The locals put up a fight – apparently France had more Omegas than I thought. Right now the survivor of the fight, guy named Petraeus, he's loose somewhere in the city and he's being hunted. Jen, you're going in after him.”

“Okay. What's the second problem?”

“This.” Danny flipped a switch and showed a group of six Haks in those weird shiny metal suits they wore, including a couple with the green glowing eyes like Eric's cousin. “This is San Francisco.”

Eric stiffened.

“They haven’t found her yet.”

“But they’re *looking* for her?” Jen had never heard Eric sound so *angry*.

“That’s my best guess, anyway. Who do you have who can go with you?”

“I’ll go with him!”

“Jenny, someone had to go to Paris, and I’ve run this.” He looked at her. “Anyone else I send comes back with this guy in a bag. We need him intact and you’re the one who can do it.”

“I’m not going...”

“Jen.” Eric put his hand up. “Thanks for worrying. But we both have jobs to do. Let’s just go do them.” In the old days, Eric couldn’t switch off like this, couldn’t go into crisis mode. She knew it was silly to worry about one kid when the whole world was... but she couldn’t stop remembering Kim and Erica and Mindy, and the *idea* of losing anyone else filled her with fury and loathing.

“This isn’t a good idea,” was all she said.

Danny walked with them down to where Door was. She wasn’t really listening as Danny and Eric discussed what he should do, instead imagining having to go tell that strange woman with similar features that Eric wasn’t alive. She’d never done this before, but she concentrated on the image, tried to fix Sharra firmly in her mind. *Hey, you... uh, Sharra, I can’t remember your whole name.*

*I didn’t know you were telepathic, Fire Hair Woman.* Sharra felt delighted, it was strange, like a taste of satisfaction, the way Jen had felt before she’d found out about all the alien crazy

when she'd thought she and Gray could just run off together. Before she'd had to let him go.

*Half. I can send. You're doing the rest of the work. Listen, Eric's about to go do something stupid and I can't talk him out of it.* She quickly explained as the three of them reached Door. *Can you maybe go with him or something?*

*Yes. I will speak with him before he leaves.* Sharra sent something like comfort to Jen.

She was *not* going to let Eric go get himself killed. Not again. None of her people died from now on.

Phillipe Petraeus had been hiding from the aliens for two days.

Well, not entirely hiding. He fought, when he could. But for the past two days, while the giant ship was gone and Paris was mostly spared, groups of them had been descending into the city. They ignored the locals and only fought the police and army when they were engaged, and ODIN was spread extremely thin by this point – they simply couldn't afford to send anyone to fight Haks that weren't fighting *them*. And the Haks had one specific target in mind.

Stone.

Apparently what he'd done in storming the alien vessel had struck a nerve. It hadn't harmed the ship or accomplished anything save for the deaths of his team, but it got their attention. The worst part was, when one of them with telepathy would get close enough for Stone to mirror their powers, was how *happy* they were. For them, this was a grand

adventure. Hunting a dangerous human who'd engaged in direct physical combat with one of the *Tsilath* (that word again, apparently not translatable, it kept popping up) and lived. For them this was equal parts safari and jousting.

He'd managed to avoid six of them already and had been forced to kill two. He'd learned a bit about them – their powers seemed to vary. Some were strongly telepathic, others psychokinetic or physically powerful. So far none of them had been like the woman from the ship, with the wide array of psionic powers. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. She'd *beaten* him the last time they fought, which was galling, but his ego was less important. He had to get to cover and come up with a plan, find a way to reconnect with Hugh Berthelot or...

He'd been hiding out in a houseboat on the Seine for the past four hours. He'd dressed his wounds, cleaned himself off as best he could, and helped himself to a long black coat from the boat's closets. He had to admit it was a lovely vessel, one could live comfortably this way. And then he sensed the telekinesis just before it smashed into the boat, cutting it in half.

He managed to throw himself away from the destruction by mirroring the powers, found himself facing three of them. They looked much the same as others he'd fought, with the black armor and glowing eyes. Two of them were carrying energy weapons of some kind, while the third, the strong telekinetic, was floating all three of them above the river. He pointed and yelled something. Stone could sense the other two, but they felt significantly weaker, so he didn't bother to try mirroring them.

He rolled to the side and lashed out with the telekinesis, managing to hit the weapons before they could fire. They scored the stones by the side of the embankment and Stone took advantage of the moment to get up towards the Pont de Bercy bridge.

There was a parked car not far from him, a BMW Series 3 coupe. Stone wasn't fond of BMW, but even if it was his favorite car in the world he was far more fond of staying alive. He grabbed the car and hurled it as they came drifting up from the river, smashing it into one of the ones with a weapon. The car and the alien both fell out of sight while Stone threw a TK punch at the one who he was mirroring, trying to keep him off guard.

Occupied in this, he didn't move in time, and the Hak he wasn't wrestling with aimed and fired. Pain ripped through his concentration as his leg caught fire. He was fairly certain he'd lose the leg even as he tried to smother the flames only to be hit by the telekinetic burst and hurled across the asphalt towards the bridge.

The impact actually put his leg out, and he could feel himself losing blood.

Then he felt new powers, stronger than the telekinetic – *much* stronger, if not as strong as the one who'd commanded the alien ship then not far off – and he cursed even as he copied them. Immediately the pain in his leg lessened, he could *feel* it healing. And for a moment his eyes widened, because he *recognized* the powers.

Then a streak of red hair, and a woman was jumping off of the metro rail track to spike the telekinetic in the face with a

fist, smashing him or her (hard to tell in that armor) into the ground and landing on top. The other Hak fell, but landed well and came up with the weapon, fired it. The woman's clothing caught fire from the invisible beam, but she shrugged it off and charged, smashing the barrel of the thing aside and crashing several fists into the Hak, causing the armor to liquefy from the impacts.

Stone got to his feet and moved on the telekinetic as it fought to regain its feet. The red hair of the woman was snapping in the air as she delivered a perfect spin kick, and the one that had shot her dropped motionless to the street. Stone took the opportunity and broke the neck of the telekinetic while it was groggy, and turned to face his rescuer.

She was busy pulling the flaming remains of a battered tank top directly off of her chest as it burned. Amazingly, the fire hadn't spread to the leather jacket she was wearing. This left her standing in a sports bra and fatigue pants on the street. Her face, her build... if not for the color of her hair and eyes, he could be back in Cologne in 1977.

"You speak English?" She reached down and zipped up her jacket to cover herself. He forced himself not to leer or otherwise show that he'd noticed her shirtless.

"Yes." He looked around. "More will come. They can talk..."

The ground shook and Stone felt the powers just before he was hit by a flying tackle. He hadn't switched, and was gratified to find himself strong and durable enough to *take* it, plowing up the asphalt as they smashed into the ground. This one's armor was blue, which was unusual – Stone hadn't seen one in blue armor yet.

They were rolling on the ground. Stone managed to yank his head to the side in time to avoid a blue fist that crashed into the street hard enough to send cracks out for meters. This one was purely physical – stone couldn't sense anything but brute physical strength, and so he simply pulled his legs up between them and kicked as hard as he could, sending the alien flying upwards into the top of the bridge where the metro tracks were. In a perfect world, a train would have been along to decapitate him, but alas no such train appeared.

What *did* happen was the woman.

Stone knew her name. He knew who she was. But to see her, to watch her in action... it was like Marie, and yet nothing like Marie.

Marie had been strong, and surprisingly brave, willing to do things that were dangerous or risky. But she hadn't ever been like this. This woman hurled herself at the alien, exchanging blows at speeds Stone could only track because he was copying her. She fought with what seemed like total abandon, and yet, with an economy of motion that was in its own way beautiful. She didn't go for flourishes. The blue blur tried to grab her by the hair and she let him get in to do it, then dropped her forehead directly into the armored faceplate so hard that it *quivered*, and then an elbow strike across it sent metal spraying like droplets.

*She knows how to fight them.*

Stone's leg was mostly healed, so he moved in to flank and saw it all unfold in six seconds. The alien, a face not dissimilar to one you could meet at any gymnasium, the broad nose and jaw of a professional fighter. The woman, with her blazing red hair

and her leather jacket, zippers and chains ringing as she moved. He threw a punch that caught her across the jaw, snapping her head back, and he then dropped to charge into her.

She had been waiting for it. She got his neck in a side hold and rammed his face into the bridge with all her strength, which was enough to shake the entire bridge and cave in the roadway. Below them you could hear bits of the bridge give way and fall into the Seine.

She stood. He did not.

Phillipe remembered to breathe at that point.

He composed his face into a mask of reserved politeness as she turned to look at him.

“As I was saying.”

“I got you.” She furrowed up her forehead, looked distracted. He was about to suggest running when a surge of light and a swirl of blue appeared behind her, making very little noise for what appeared to be some kind of rift in the air.

Then they weren't in Paris anymore.

They were in what felt like an underground space. Phillipe Petraeus knew how those felt, he'd been in enough of them over the years. The woman was still there, but now there was a slight, slim boy with a ready smile and another, barely in his twenties with the look of a hunting animal on his bland, tan face. Stone reached out and mirrored the telepathy he could feel, shielded his mind.

“Welcome to our little slice of home, Phillipe.” Anderson turned to the monitors. “Tilda. I got him.”

Jen found herself watching from a nearby bed – sitting on it like a bench, not actually *resting* in it, that would be sane – as Mirry gave their ‘guest’ the once over.

“You’re fine.” She said, stepping away from him. “You need to eat and probably sleep. You might have the beginnings of a respiratory infection. Most of what was wrong with you got fixed while you were copying Jen, which is why you need to eat.”

He nodded. Jen found herself curious about the guy. She’d never heard of an Omega who could copy other Omegas before – she wondered if it worked for people like Carlos, who were *changed* by their powers. He wasn’t awful looking for someone probably about the same age as her father.

That distracted her for a few seconds. She’d gone back up to Thunder Bay for a week a couple of months ago, just to see everybody. She was surprised at how much she missed Elaine, at how tired and old her aunt had looked. She knew she’d helped put some of that exhaustion there and she wanted to fix it. Maybe once this was all over... but Wolf refused to leave the old base. And Jen refused to live anywhere *near* it – she’d come to hate the very sight of it. But she didn’t hate her father. She just didn’t know him very well.

“Very well.” Petraeus spoke. Jen shook her head to clear it – the last punch from the Hak had rung her bell pretty well, even with her healing she’d felt concussed for a few seconds. “Where should I go?”

“Jen will show you.” Mirry looked pale. Jen hopped off the bed and walked up next to her, put her hand on Mirry’s shoulder. Mirry absently brushed her lips over it and they

stayed like that for a moment. Then Jen turned to Stone.

“Come on. Grub’s this way.”

Mirry watched them go, then opened her mind.

*I hate hate hate this. We can’t trust him. Have you looked at his thoughts?*

*I have.* Danny thought at her. *It’s a rat’s nest in there, and he knows to keep himself compartmentalized. Did you get anything?*

*Nothing I could make sense of. If he’s still obsessed with her mother...*

*He’s covering it well.* Danny agreed. *For now we have to watch him. But with them up there...*

*I know.* Mirry leaned back against a bed, sighed. *I can’t delay any longer. Are you ready?*

*I’ll be right down.* He lingered in her mind, reassuring, and she let him. A small spasm of panic hit her, and she let that flow into him, let him take it for her. She remembered the two of them in a van and his shields wavering. *I love her, oh God I love her and I can’t ever let her know.*

She felt the questioning presence that had grown inside her reach out with its mind, wordless, just pure *being* touching at both of them at once. It was time.

Door opened the portal and Eric stepped through first, followed by Sharra. Door looked up and his usual smile died on his face.

Eric was shirtless. He was often shirtless now, as the Haks always attacked him with as much force as possible the

moment they saw him. Often he ended up completely naked, his clothes burned away, but this time he'd at least retained his pants. His entire torso was streaked with blood. It wasn't his.

Sharra was wearing her armor, only her face visible. She had her hand on his shoulder. Door knew what that gesture meant. She was trying to comfort him, but the look on his face said clearly that he wouldn't *be* comforted.

"Door." Eric sounded like a heavy metal door swinging on old hinges. "I'm going to link with you. Open a portal at the location I show you, okay?"

"Sure." He felt the place appear, as if he'd always known it, and he opened the way. Door liked using his powers – there was a euphoria for him in the moment the portal opened.

A slight woman with brown hair and a gentle expression stepped through and stopped, horrified, at the sight of Eric. He smiled, a trifle forced.

"I'm okay, Liz."

"Kyrie! You're *soaked in blood!*"

"It isn't his blood." Sharra said. "My cousin Jakleth and a few of his soldiers, that's all. Ky'Rian didn't even kill them, although he could have." She nodded. "I'm most pleased with your progress, cousin. I'm sure Jak will say so as well once he is capable of speech."

"And now you've met Sharra." Eric reached out with his mind to find Danny... and found a huge telepathic void in the infirmary. He probed the edges – it was definitely generated by Danny and Mirry working together. He was about to probe it when they reached out to *him*.

*Don't. Very busy. Delicate. Keep out, keep others out. Will*

*tell you when it's safe.*

He sent wordless assent and turned back to the woman who'd given birth to him, the woman he didn't know and yet could feel. He could feel her – like a rock in a river she bent the usual telepathic chatter in a room around herself, the solidity and unwavering focus of her.

It would have been easy to be angry with Elizabeth Sheridan if he couldn't feel her and know she loved him. In a way he almost resented it, resented that he couldn't even be bitter. He was helpless, because she was his mother and she loved him and he *needed* it, with the world falling apart he needed what she was offering him.

“Okay, Sharra. Take my mom down? Let her surprise Kyrion. He could use it.”

“I will.” The very large alien turned to the petite human. “If you will? I will show you.”

“In a moment.” She walked over, put her arms around him despite the blood spatter. “You come find me when you have a moment. Or I'll come find you.”

“I will.” He made a reedy sound as he breathed in. “I will, mom.”

After they left he fought to regain his composure. His hands shook. He remembered punching right through the wall of force Jakleth had put up, ripping the man bodily out of the nanotech armor, pummeling him through the air. Remembered the two of them crashing down into a mass of graves in Colma, the large city of mostly graveyards outside of San Francisco proper. He'd been so furious he thought he was going to tear the man's head off. Had considered doing it.

He went walking downstairs. Saw Thomas Peter come back through a portal just as he was about to leave the room, nodded to him. They were all going out pretty regularly now. If not the group from this bunker, then Door was serving as a traffic conductor for some ODIN group or even one of the ex-Colony squads if they looked like they needed help.

Sera was back. He could feel her in his room.

*Hey, there.* He thought gently, not wanting to surprise her.

*Hey.* She felt as exhausted as he was. *You come bed?*

*Can't. Gotta talk to Danny.* He took a beat. *My mom's here.*

Sera didn't respond in words but a shaft of terror went through her. He couldn't say he blamed her. Meeting the boyfriend's parents was always a big deal, but in a private bunker in-between desperate missions, fighting invading aliens? He sent reassurance.

*You don't have to meet her. I'm just telling you she's here.*

*I... I mean, I don't **not** want to meet her.*

*We'll deal with it later. Just be warned.* He sent more reassurance. He walked into the mess hall or commissary or whatever half dazed, beyond exhausted.

He got three feet into the door and a guy in a black coat stood up, staring at him in shock, and yelled "*Hak!*" He turned to see who it was.

Then the guy smashed him into the concrete wall.

"You were impressive. In Paris." Stone spoke in between bites of a truly dreadful slice of 'pizza'. He didn't even like *good* pizza. He'd had it in Naples once, supposedly the home of true

Neapolitan pizza, and found even *that* unpleasantly greasy and thick for his tastes. So eating *this* was almost an ordeal, but his body desperately needed food. He was mirroring Jennifer to speed up his healing while observing her and trying not to *look* like he was observing her.

“I’m impressive everywhere.” She said this as if she were telling him the time. He almost smiled. There was something charming about her casual arrogance. It didn’t feel sincere to him.

“I would imagine so.” He winced as his jaw suddenly shifted and a series of fractures in it closed. Jennifer was sitting across from him, eating her own pizza with enthusiasm. *I will have to show you what real food is.*

“So, you took on one of their ships, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Get surprised by the pilot?” She looked up at him, and he realized he would have probably been angry if anyone else had asked. “Fuck knows I did.”

“More than surprised.” He put the pizza down, looked at his hand. “There were four of us. Now there is just me.”

He saw the look on her face, the shock and for a moment sympathy, and filed it away. *Find out what that means.* He could see her soften, her pose of bored superiority melting away a little.

“I’m sorry.”

“It is the risk we take. How did you cope with the pilot of the ship you crashed?”

“I concussed him.” She put her finger on her forehead, just above where it dipped to join her nose. Her really very lovely

nose. It was so easy to pretend they were in a café in Amsterdam in 1984, drinking coffee, her telling him about how tired she was of feeling Wolf's disapproval. How tired she was, in general. Him reaching out to take her hand...

He stopped himself with an effort.

"That easy?"

"Oh, it wasn't easy." The right corner of her mouth went up, exposing a canine. "We slammed each other all over that weird double-deck of theirs while Pete kept the rest of them off of me. They have a lot of powers, the green ones, so it took a lot of effort. Luckily I had a plan."

"Oh? Tell me of this plan. I'll keep it in mind."

"It's very complicated. I call it *punching*."

He felt the powers just as she finished her joke. If he hadn't, he would have laughed gently, played the reticent older man more, felt out her reactions. But there was a surge and then he saw the man – *not a man, one of them* - walk in the room, naked and blood smeared. He remembered seeing Orphan with her chest torn open, seeing Verran incinerated.

He didn't even remember screaming. He just hurled himself forward and smashed the alien into the wall. Had it killed its way through Anderson's people? How had it gotten there? And...

He drew his hand back and threw a punch that would strike the forehead, at the spot Jennifer had shown him.

His fist stopped an inch from the target, caught in a telekinetic field. Then he felt the power he was copying *vanish*. The TK field was there, was still holding his fist in a vice, but he was in his grace period. As far as his Omega was concerned, the

man in front of him had no powers.

“Eric, *don't!*” Jennifer yelled from behind him, moving at inhuman speeds herself to get between them.

She wasn't quite fast enough.

Stone found himself hurled backwards, through the ridiculous robot that had handed him his pizza, through the wall behind it and into the kitchen area. He came to a stop after smashing into the stainless steel freezer doors, crumpling them around his body like he'd fallen into a soft down comforter instead of inches of metal.

He borrowed Jennifer's powers and prepared to attack, but she was between them now.

“Eric, it's okay. He didn't know about you, that's our bad.”

“*Our bad?* He fucking...”

“His whole *team* died.” She was looking him in the eyes and Stone remembered the news report from New York now, the teenager who'd fought off multiple Harrakin. “He thought you were one of them. You know what I mean.”

The boy who looked like a man glared at Stone, who'd pried himself up out of the destroyed appliance and was slowly walking back into the room.

“I take it this is who Danny sent you to collect?”

“Yeah.” Jennifer looked faintly embarrassed and Stone couldn't tell exactly who she was embarrassed by or for. “This is Phillipe Petraeus. You call yourself Stone, right? That's what you said?”

“Yes.” Stone sized the boy up. He *looked* like one of them, but not quite, not when you really got a good look at him. There were signs of his true age in how he stood, and signs of his

human parentage in his facial features. “I apologize. I mistook you for... well. As Jennifer informed you.”

The boy nodded, curtly.

“I was just getting him something to eat. Then I guess he gets to confab with Danny...”

“Not for a bit he doesn’t.” Eric said. “You can wait here for a bit. Try not to attack anyone else – we have several Harrakin exiles here working with us.”

Stone realized immediately what *that* meant.

“That’s how you know so much about their ships. The intelligence you shared with ODIN. You got it from them.”

“Got it in one.” Jennifer said, trying to move them all past the moment. “Where are we going?”

“I’ll tell you about it in the hall.” Stone watched the boy carefully. He seemed protective of Jennifer, but the way he held himself wasn’t amorous – he wasn’t touching her very much, nor were his gazes particularly lingering. He turned and looked at Stone again, and Stone *still* couldn’t feel his powers. That bothered him.

He nodded to Jennifer as she shrugged and followed the boy outside.

“Okay, *now* can you tell me where we’re going?”

“Infirmary.”

“Why?”

“Mirry’s in labor.” Eric still looked like he was on the cusp of going back in that room and ripping Stone limb from limb. It was the kind of anger you only get when you’re too tired to

think, the mindless urge to smash things until whatever's bothering you is gone. Still, concerned for him or not, his news took her off guard.

"She's *what?* Come on!" She tore off down the hall at top speed and after a few seconds felt Eric behind her. The two of them came to a stop at the door, not wanting to come blasting in with a huge gust of wind behind them. Running at high speed in enclosed spaces like this always caused issues.

Eric opened the door and they walked inside, and Jen immediately saw something unusual.

Danny, with his hands in gloves and a medical mask over his face, standing over his pregnant wife with a look of intense concentration on his face. His eyes looked off.

"Uh, do you know what you're doing?"

"I should hope so." Danny's voice also sounded strange. "The weird bit is getting used to having man hands. His hands are surprisingly large for a guy under six feet."

"I... really... *just love* hearing... about how big... my *hands* are." Mirry panted through the sentence. It took Jen a moment to realize what was happening.

"You... switched bodies?"

"Not exactly." Mirry in Danny said. "I'm still in my body and he's in his, but I'm getting all of his sensory input and driving him around while he, well, he's going to be one of the few men who will ever be able to say he knows what labor feels like."

Eric actually put his hand over his mouth to suppress a laugh.

"I... can still... kick your... ass." Mirry's body said.

"No you can't." Eric laughed. "Jesus, you really *must* love

her.”

“He does.” Danny’s body said. Jen caught the look on his face, realized how much Mirry loved him back, saw how they fit. She was glad she’d gotten over it. That it didn’t hurt anymore. “He suggested it. Now the two of you go stand over there and don’t touch anything, especially not my body. I shouldn’t even let you in here, but I wanted family for this.”

They did as they were told. Eric was back against the wall, and Jen rested up against him and they watched, not saying anything. She laid her head against his, cheek to cheek. If Eric wasn’t her little brother, she could at least pretend he was, sometimes. This felt like one of those times. They watched as Mirry, in her husband’s body, delivered her own baby. If it was weird to watch, how much weirder was it to experience?

A half an hour later, with much pushing and screaming, a pink little thing entered the world and yelled, not with her lungs, but with her mind. The sense of confusion and fear at the sudden change in her living situation was met by four minds all projecting comfort and security, reassuring her. Jen found it easier to speak to the baby than it had ever been, it was just automatic. Danny’s body laid the baby on Mirry’s chest, and then staggered back slightly as they switched back.

Jen was already at Mirry’s side, so Eric caught Danny as he staggered.

“You’re a father, man.”

“Holy shit.” Danny was sweating. “She’s finally here.”

No one said anything else for a while. Mirry looked at her new daughter, then up to Danny. For a moment, she let herself just be Mirry, and not the freedom fighter, Omega expert, or

genius. Her husband... she'd met him when he was still a boy, when they were both still children. And now they *had* a child.

"She's beautiful." Jen said.

"She looks like her dad." Mirry held the baby close. "Share how it was with me."

"You sure you don't want to wait?"

"No. Share it." Her eyes flickered as Danny dropped his shields and let her take his memory of the experience, and she let out an exhausted laugh. "Come here."

He went down on one knee to put his head up against his wife's and stare at his child, amazed. They were going to have to teach her to shield, but for now they just enclosed her in the bubble of their shared minds, let her feel them together.

"You guys want to hold her?" Mirry looked up.

"I've never held a baby in my life." Jen said.

"First time for everything." Mirry waited for Jen to come in close, then handed the tiny little bundle up into Jen's arms.

"Support the head."

Jen was expecting to feel awkward or clumsy or afraid. Instead, the baby opened her tiny blue eyes and Jen could feel her just *accept*, and she cradled that tiny little thing to herself and cooed softly. A half remembered piece of song came to her.

"Au clair de la lune,/ On n'y voit qu'un peu./ On chercha la plume,/ On chercha du feu." Her voice sounded harsh and deep to her ears, and she blushed when she saw Eric staring at her.

"Wow." It was Danny who spoke up. "I had no idea you can sing."

"It's just a lullaby. My *tante* used to sing it to me."

"It was beautiful, Jenny." Mirry held out her hands.

“Gimmie my baby.”

She did, laughing. The baby settled back into her mother’s arms, making a small noise.

“What’s her name?” Eric said, coming closer. The baby was surprisingly animate and interested for a newborn, but then again, she’d been in telepathic contact with her parents for months.

“We’re naming her Joan.” Mirry said. “After my grandmother. She was the only one who actually seemed to want me around once they figured out I was weird.”

“You two are her godparents.” Danny said. “Don’t argue.”

“Wasn’t going to.” Jen said, surprising herself. She looked down at the baby, Mirry and Danny’s baby, and there wasn’t any of the conflict or envy or anything that she expected would be there. She just wanted more than anything to make sure she’d be safe. She looked up at Eric. “You down for this?”

“Yeah.” He was smiling his *old* smile, the one that wasn’t trying to look brave. “Yeah, I really am. She’s amazing.”

They left the parents to recover and have some alone time together. It would take a while for them to build shields in Joan’s mind, to teach her how to protect her thoughts. Until that happened, one of them would always have to be shielding her.

“Did you *feel* that?” Jen leaned against the wall when they were out in the hallway.

“I think I did. The way she just *decided* on us?”

“Not even a few minutes old and...” Jen laughed. “We *have* to win now.”

“We will.” Eric sounded different. Less tired, and maybe

less afraid. "I'm going to head down and sleep for a bit. I'll talk to you later, Jenny." She hugged him on impulse, and he hugged back, and then he was heading down to the room he was sharing with Sera.

Whistling, she walked to her own room. The aliens could wait a few hours.